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***What Remains and The Failure of Idealism in the Spanish Civil War***

Volumes 1 & 2

Volume 1

**What Remains**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD  
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This thesis consists of two parts: a creative work and a reader's companion to the novel which reflects on the process of research. The creative work is a novel entitled *What Remains*. Set during the Spanish civil war, it has a twin narrative structure, and through alternating chapters follows the fortunes of Michael, a Scottish volunteer fighting with the International Brigades, and Ana, a Spanish woman in Nationalist territory whose husband is fighting for the Republicans. At the start of the novel Michael volunteers to fight in the conflict and the narrative follows his progress through a year and eight months of fighting for the Republic and examines how the harsh realities of war affect his political beliefs. Ana discovers her husband has been captured by the Nationalists and makes a Faustian pact with a Nationalist captain to get her husband out of prison and back home. *What Remains* is an exploration of how war affects the soldier and the civilian, how they are desensitised and ultimately dehumanised by their environment. The reader's companion is titled *Faith and doubt: The failure of idealism in the Spanish civil war* and is intended as an illumination of the process of researching and writing a historical novel. It guides the reader through the historical research, the texts utilised by the writer and the broader themes and contradictions of the war as discovered through the reading of nonfiction and creative works.

My thesis is comprised of a novel, *What Remains*, set during the Spanish civil war, and a reader's companion, entitled *Faith and Doubt: The Failure of Idealism in the Spanish Civil War*. The novel follows the fictional journey of Michael and Ana, the central characters, through the war. The reader's companion is an exploration of the history books, memoirs, oral histories, novels and films that formed the central part of my research for *What Remains* and informed my portrayal of the conflict. When writing *What Remains*, one of my primary concerns was to make the novel accessible and enjoyable for the average reader. I particularly had in mind a reader with no prior knowledge of the war. The reader's companion was written in the same inclusive spirit, a decision which was inspired, in part, by the political themes of the novel and the concerns of the time.

I have always been compelled by the Spanish civil war and its politics, literature and art, and because of this interest, near the start of my Creative Writing MLitt, I decided to write a novel about the conflict. Six months passed before I even began my research; I was apprehensive of attempting to write historical fiction. In the afterword to *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel comments 'there's always the danger with historical fiction that it may fall short as both literature and history' (Mantel 2010: 9) and in a vague sense I was aware of this, intimidated by the size of the project and the complexities of researching and writing historical fiction. Sebastian Faulks, in his introduction to *Birdsong*, describes a similar trepidation. 'The doubt clawed at me, and rightly so, I felt, given the scale of what I proposed and my lack of qualification for the task...' (Faulks 1994: xiv)

I was troubled by the relationship between the history of the war and the story I wanted to write, unsure how to negotiate a balance between the two, and this led me to a preoccupation with the idea of historical truth in fiction. Fiction and history are two distinct forms of truth and my concern was how to merge the two without compromising the integrity of either. This difficulty is highlighted by Rebecca Stott in *Ghostwalk*. Accused of 'making up stories', one of the characters mounts a defence of his fictions: 'the *spirit* of my story is true...my oyster-seller ghost works as a historical metaphor. For a tourist, she's much more eloquent than any dry-as-dust history book...' (Stott 2008: 151) I wanted my novel to have the same eloquence for a reader unfamiliar with the Spanish civil war, but I also felt it was important to be as historically accurate as possible. In common with other historical novelists, I feel 'research must be as good as I can possibly make it' (Mantel 2010: 7). In *What Remains* the narrative of Michael, the soldier, was carefully plotted around real places and events. It is

not the story of what did happen, but the story of what would, or could, have happened to someone like him.

*What Remains* evolved from my research on the Spanish civil war. At the beginning of my research I had a naive, idealistic view of the war as a battle between democracy and fascism. This very limited understanding did not prepare me for the complexities I found as my research progressed. *Faith and Doubt: The Failure of Idealism in the Spanish Civil War* is an account of this research. It is intended to guide the reader through the sources that informed and inspired *What Remains*, and, in doing so, illustrate the relationship between the fictional novel and the historical research which inspired it. I desired the same clarity and eloquence for the reader's companion that I hoped to achieve in the novel - for the reader unfamiliar with the Spanish civil war, I wanted to guide them through the history and the literature in order to make explicit the sources for *What Remains*. However, I also hoped to offer a more informed reader a slightly different perspective, a more complicated view of the conflict.

A year into the book, when I had almost finished the first draft, I was talking about the war in the car with my dad one day. Out of nowhere he said, "Did you know that your nonno fought in the Spanish civil war? For the Nationalists." I was horrified. The shock must have shown on my face. My dad laughed embarrassedly, and then I was ashamed of my expression, pained at his shame. I only have one, very slight memory of my paternal grandfather, Emilio Di Mario, feeding me peaches on a hot day in Rome, when I was about eighteen months old. It is my first memory and apart from that I don't remember him at all. He died six months later and my dad has never talked about him much. But that day, after my dad's revelation, I elicited the bare bones of my grandfather's story.

He had signed up for the army in the mid thirties as a teenager and found himself sent to Spain, and then straight on into the second world war, fighting for the Fascists. When Italy was liberated and Mussolini toppled, the Nazis saw their erstwhile allies as traitors. My grandfather spent two years interned in concentration camps, first Dachau then Auschwitz. Many Italian soldiers were executed - my grandfather could be considered lucky that he ended up in a concentration camp and not in front of a firing line.

By all accounts he was a stern, emotionally distant man, deeply damaged by his time in Dachau and Auschwitz. It cannot be denied that he fought on the wrong side of history. But I find it difficult to judge him or condemn his choices. He grew up in grinding poverty in a mountain village, with very little access to education and extremely limited opportunities

for employment. When he came back to Italy after nine years of war, he opened a bar in Rome with his brother and worked relentlessly to provide for his wife and children. Born into a family that had nothing, when he died he was able to leave some money in his will for me and my brothers. I put this money towards the university fees for my PhD, which has focused, creatively and academically, on the Spanish civil war. In a strange way, I feel that we have come full circle, and my thesis is dedicated to him, a gesture of love and redemption towards the past.

What Remains by Maria Di Mario

## The Ebro Valley, September 1938

He remembered the taste of the air, full of dust and smoke. He remembered the heat of the blood running down his arm and into the dirt of the shaking earth underneath him. He remembered the crack of the rifles and the screaming of the planes. He could still see the grey face of the man beside him and the blue sky above them making a mockery of it all. Michael put his head in his hands. He'd been transferred to this hospital a week ago and it was quiet here, far from the front line. Lizards scampered along the white walls behind him and the leaves of the orange trees overhead filled the air with their scent. The calm voices of the nurses were carried on the breeze.

"It's time for dinner."

It was the nurse that had changed his dressing that morning. He couldn't remember her name. "I'm not hungry."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Come, Miguel, you must eat. Your shoulder won't heal if you don't eat, no?"

He shrugged her hand off. The movement sent a spasm of pain down his arm and he winced.

"Is there pain?"

He nodded.

"I am sorry there is nothing I can give you," she said, frowning.

"It's fine." He knew how short they were of pain relief, of everything.

"You are one of the lucky ones."

"I know." He did know. The man in the bed next to him lay all day staring at the place where his legs used to be.

"But you must have something to eat. You need strength, to heal."

"I'm just not hungry."

"Va bien," she said. "I'll bring you a little plate, and then you see how much you want to eat."

She began to move away across the grass.

"Wait," called Michael. "Can – would you sit with me a while? Just for a moment."

She looked towards the hospital walls, and then back at Michael. "For a moment, I suppose." She sat down, smoothing the pale skirt of her uniform over her knees. A bird began singing in the tree overhead, the notes tumbling down through the branches.

"I'm sorry," Michael said. "I've forgotten your name."



"I am Pura," she said.

"A nice name."

She smiled at him. "Gracias."

"What do you do in real life, Pura?"

She lifted her hands in a gesture of puzzlement, palms upwards, exposing the inner part of her wrists where the veins branched out under the skin like coral, and Michael flinched. "In real life?"

"Before the war, I mean."

"I was an actress."

"In the pictures?"

"No, in a theatre."

"How did you end up here?"

"On the day of the rising I was in Madrid, it was the end of a tour. Alejandro joined the militias. There were women fighting too, but I couldn't have fought."

"No?"

Pura shook her head. "I was too afraid."

"I was scared too," said Michael. "I was always scared."

"You should have become a nurse like me." She smiled at him, not the compassionate smile of before but an arch, teasing smile. "I think the uniform would be very well on you."

He could see for a moment the flirt she would have been before the war, briefly imagined her leaning against a bar in a theatre, accepting drinks, laughing at the jokes of her admirers.

"Who was Alejandro?"

"He was our director," she said. She paused and shook her head. "I don't know where he is now. I don't know even if he is alive."

Michael couldn't think of anything else to say to keep the conversation going. The sun was going down behind them, a finger of light touching Pura's cheek, illuminating the barely perceptible down on her skin.

"Where are you from, Miguel?"

"Glasgow," he said.

She shook her head. "From England?"

"No, it's a city in Scotland."

"Ah, Scotland! Where the men wear skirts, no?"

He smiled. "Only sometimes."

“And how did you come here, so far from your own city, in this war?”

“I volunteered.” The words were bitter in his mouth.

“Then you were very brave.”

“I was very young,” he said. “It was January last year that I left home. It doesn’t seem that long, but twenty months of the front - I don’t remember before. How do you go back to your own life, after so long in the middle of this war?” His voice broke and he looked away from her, ashamed. Pura touched his arm.

“Before I came to this hospital,” she said, “I worked in a field hospital on the Aragon front. I saw many terrible things, men wounded terribly, in much pain.”

“And how do you forget those things?” Michael asked. “How do you shut them out and carry on?” He dragged his hand down over his face.

She shrugged. “I keep a journal,” she said. “It helps, a little. I write down the things I’ve seen, I put myself in it, like it is a story and I am a character, and then I can step out of that character and forget, as you forget the lines of a play, once it is over. I write my war down and I shut the book, and I never read it. Maybe one day I will, but not until these days are far, far behind me.”

“A journal,” Michael repeated.

“If it can help you,” she said, “I will find for you paper and a pen.”

She came to him the next morning. He was sitting in the same spot, the morning sun full in his face, leaning back with his eyes closed, when he felt a shadow fall over him. When he opened his eyes all he could see was a figure, dark against the glare of the light but he knew it was Pura by the blaze around her head, the sun catching her hair and making it flame. A picture came to Michael’s mind, a picture that he’d not looked at for years, though he’d spent countless childhood hours poring over it. It was a picture of his namesake, the archangel, in the Children’s Bible he’d received at his confirmation. He’d loved the idea of the warrior angel, with his flaming sword. But he’d realised here that angels and war had nothing to do with each other. Then she moved out of the sun, and was reduced to the small, soft faced nurse of the day before. She put a notebook and a pencil down on the bench between them.

“For your journal,” she said.

“Where did you get them?”

“I talked to Dottore Guetta, and he gives them to me, for you.”

Michael picked up the notebook. The cover was black, the paper inside thin and coarse. He looked at it and wondered if words could distract him. The notebook seemed too small to hold it all. Pura stood up and smiled at him.

“I hope it helps.”

Michael stood too and on impulse kissed her cheek. “Gracias, Pura,” he said, a little embarrassed.

She walked away and Michael sat back down, holding the notebook in one hand and the pencil in the other. The sun was full on his face and lights danced in front of his closed eyes.

## The First Meeting

Ana was waiting on a wooden bench. Dust motes floated and sparkled in the light from the large window at the end of the hallway and a square of sunlight had been moving slowly across the tiled floor for the last two hours. It was coming to the warmest part of the day, the siesta hour, and a trickle of sweat ran down the curve of Ana's spine, tracing a path from the nape of her neck to the small of her back. She could hear the ringing of a telephone from behind the closed door, seeming to come to her ears from a great distance. The presence of the soldiers coming and going at the end of the corridor, a blur of movement and noise that shook the floor with their footsteps and filled the air with their voices, was making her even more nervous. She tried to prevent her crossed legs from shaking, tried to stop herself from twisting her gloves. She didn't want her palms to be slippery with sweat when she shook his hand. She thought back to the day last week, when she'd popped downstairs to Elisa's and found Teresa sitting there.

"Federico's back home," Elisa had said, glancing at Teresa.

Ana sat down in a chair, her knees suddenly weak. "Federico's back from the war? What do you mean?"

Federico had left the same day Frasco did, the day after the uprising. It was clear that the Nationalists would take their city, so a lot of the men from their area left for Madrid to fight for the Republic. They'd been in the same unit, all taken prisoner the month before. It was enough of a miracle that they were safe in a prison, Ana had thought, and not killed. But now Federico was home. Was it possible that Frasco was coming home too?

"I mean he's back home, back from the war," said Elisa.

"Out of prison?"

"He's sitting in the house right now! But you can't tell anyone." Elisa glanced at Teresa but her eyes were fixed on the floor. "Sorry carina, I know it's supposed to be secret. But Ana won't tell. I just thought it might give her some hope. We all need hope in times like these."

"I won't tell," said Ana. "But how, Teresa? I don't understand."

"I went to see a man. A captain. We – he arranged it all." Her voice was flat, her eyes still lowered.

"Who? What's his name? Maybe, if I go and talk to him, he'll arrange for Frasco to come home." Her heart was beating fast and she was gripping the sides of her chair.

“No!” Teresa looked up. “Don’t go, Ana.”

Teresa’s eyes reflected the lamplight back at Ana and the hairs rose on her arms. “What – what did you have to do?”

“I won’t tell you his name. He - you mustn’t go, Ana.”

Elisa met Ana’s eyes and shook her head. “These soldiers, they think they can do whatever they like, just because they’re in charge. As if authority puts you above morality.” She spat into the fire and it flared and hissed. “Don’t get mixed up with them Ana. They’re animals.”

Ana leant forward. “Teresa, you tell me his name. I don’t care what I have to do. I’ll do anything,” she paused for emphasis, “anything, to get Frasco back home.”

She’d passed by the theatre on the way to the military headquarters. It had closed down at the start of the war but Ana still had a key for the stage door hanging on the cord with her apartment keys. The posters that hung at the front of the building were faded, strips of them peeling away, and the atmosphere of neglect was only reinforced when she came round to the stage door.

The courtyard at the back used to be full of life. Here the stage managers would build the smaller props, their conversations buzzing in the air like mosquitoes, mixing with the music that sometimes came down from the rehearsal room windows. The theatre cat would be lying in the sun, his pale golden fur reflecting the light, and usually an actress would be perched on the wall next to him, stroking his back with long leisurely movements. There was always an actor or two walking up and down in the corners, smoking cigarettes and reciting lines under their breath, and Arturo the doorman played endless games of checkers with Daniel, the old stagehand, at a table next to the stage door, turning to greet her when she arrived in the morning. “Buenos dias Anacita! This rascal is cheating me again!”

Now it was empty and silent, a chair overturned in the corner, weeds and flowers growing from between the paving stones. The key was stiff in the lock and Ana struggled to turn it, the metal digging into her palm. Everything was in darkness when she finally got the door open but she took a candle from the stock in Arturo’s cubicle and lit it with his matches. She wanted to go up to the wardrobe, her old workplace, and the rooms where she had first seen Frasco.

As she climbed the stairs, she looked into the rooms that she passed; the dressing rooms, the production office, the prop store, the rehearsal rooms. Dust lay thick on the floors and spiders had spun their threads in the corners, but despite that, everything seemed

untouched. She'd half expected to find that vandals had been at work; the theatre had shut at the start of the war, over two years ago now. All the men who worked there had left for the front or been arrested in the first few days of the rising. And yet it seemed there had been no retribution, at least not to the building. Perhaps it was because of the theatre's reputation. There were countless stories of ghosts; a priest who appeared in the stairwell; a white lady who walked between dressing room and stage; an actor who'd thrown himself from the upper circle after a bad review. Ana, however, had always felt that whatever spirit occupied the building was a benevolent one. She'd often stayed, working late, until she was the last in the building, but she'd never been made uneasy by the empty rooms below her. Even now, walking up the gloomy stairs with silence settled over the building like a shroud, she felt that the ghosts were the guardians of the theatre, watching over her.

She reached the door to the wardrobe rooms. Here, too, the spiders had been at work. It was difficult to conjure the memory of her first meeting with Frasco when everything looked so different to the way it had before the war. Then it had been a cheerful place; her sewing machine gleaming, buttons and glass jewels heaped up in corners like childish treasure, rails of costumes and piles of material whose colours were iridescent in the light from the wide window, costume designs pinned to the walls. Now the sketches were yellowed and curling up at the corners, the colours of the fabric dull under layers of dust. Her sewing machine was draped with cobwebs and when she ran her hand along one of the rails of costumes, a cloud of moths sprung into the air. The flame of the candle leapt and flickered. She walked around the corner to the shelves. The material she had ordered for the last production, still in rehearsal at the time of the rising, was sitting where she'd left it, neatly folded. The building creaked and sighed and Ana shivered. As she turned back to the other end of the room there was a movement at the corner of her eye and her heart jumped in her chest, before she realised that she'd caught a glimpse of her own reflection.

She approached the mirror and scrutinised herself carefully in the glass. She'd lost a lot of weight since the start of the war, like everyone else, but the lipstick and rouge gave some colour to her face. Her hair had lost its shine but it was still thick, and there were no strands of grey to be seen yet. If she unfocused her eyes she could see the shy bride she'd been, four years before. And Frasco at her shoulder, with admiration in his eyes. For a moment she allowed herself to imagine a knock on the door. She would open it slowly, hardly daring to hope, and he would be leaning against the doorframe with that half smile on his face. She would wrap her arms around him and bury her face in his chest. He would kiss the top of her head where the part was, and she would suck in his smell of smoke and soap

and something else, the smell of his skin. The rough texture of his jacket would scratch her cheek and she would listen for his heart beating in his chest and be filled with a sense of wonder, as she always was. As she pictured the scene her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away hurriedly, not wishing to spoil her make up, and when she looked again in the glass she felt suddenly ashamed. She should be dressing up only for her husband. And even though it was, in a way, for Frasco, she still felt cheapened as she looked at herself in the mirror. She backed away, out of the room. A feeling of uneasiness flooded over her and she hurried down the stairs. Her footsteps seemed to echo and she had a strange feeling that she was following someone who vanished around the next corner just as she emerged from the corner before. When she reached the stage door she blew out the candle and groped for the door handle in the dark, and her chest expanded with relief when she stepped out into the street.

It had been a foolish thing to do, she told herself as she waited on the bench, twisting her gloves in her hands, and it was even more foolish to be unnerved by it. She rehearsed her speech yet again in her head, remembering the smiles and gestures so patiently practised in front of the mirror. She'd seen the actresses do it in rehearsal so many times. She was wearing her costume and she'd learnt her lines, but this was different, more important than any play. After all, this was the man Teresa had come to see and now she had Federico back.

The door at the end of the corridor opened. There was a man standing there. Against the light from the window he was a dark silhouette. A woman walked out of the door and along the corridor. She looked at Ana as she passed but Ana couldn't read anything in her eyes, which were flat and empty of all expression.

“Senora Valladares?”

He waited for her to enter and then came in behind her. The door clicked shut and Ana had to suppress a sudden impulse to get up and run out. She was determined to be composed. His office was curiously bare; no filing cabinets, no files or stacks of paper. Just an empty desk with a telephone, and a map of Spain on the wall behind, covered in pins. Everything inside her seemed to sink as she looked at it. She hadn't realised how much of the country Franco's troops had taken. There seemed no way the Republicans would win now.

He stepped in front of the map and Ana looked up at him. There was something familiar about him, she was sure of it, but she couldn't place him. He was tall, powerfully built. His uniform was clean and brushed, the buttons gleaming, the medals in a neat row

across his breast. He was clean shaven but his skin had a bluish tinge. Ana raised her eyes to his and in their blackness saw nothing but her own reflection.

“What can I do for you today, Senora?”

“It is very kind of you to see me, Capitán. I appreciate it.”

“Not at all. I have less to do now that we are winning.”

There was a moment of silence. They looked at one another.

“Capitán, I have come to see you today about my husband.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I have had word that he is in San Sebastian.”

The captain smiled, his upper lip stretching back to reveal long teeth. “If your husband is in prison, Senora, he must have committed a crime. Our new government is not in the habit of incarcerating innocent men.”

He stood up and walked around the desk. Ana’s heart beat quickly. She could feel dampness under her arms and behind her knees, in the palms of her hands.

“My husband’s only crime, Capitán, was to fight for what he believed in.”

“For what he believed in, Senora? Your husband is in prison because he is a traitor to his country.” His voice was low and he was smiling slightly. “How much do you want your husband back home, Senora?”

“More than anything, Capitán.”

“And what would you do to secure his release?”

Ana swallowed. She had prepared herself for this. Nausea swelled inside her as she said, “I would do anything you wanted me to, Capitán.” He leant back, his weight on the edge of the desk, looking at her carefully, up and down. She felt like an animal under his eyes.

“Very well, Senora,” he said finally. “I have a proposition for you.”

Ana looked at his large hands and pictured them grasping roughly at her flesh. She looked at his thin lips and imagined them pressed against her skin. She looked at his bulk and knew that the weight of him would crush something out of her forever. But Teresa had done it and so could she, if it meant Frasco coming home to her.

“You will find three items for me.”

This was not what she had been expecting.

“You are surprised, Senora? What did you expect?”

“I do not expect anything, Capitán. Please, tell me what you want me to do.”

“Should you fail to find these three items for me, Senora, you must provide them yourself. But do not worry. You will have your husband back.”



It hadn't seemed real to her until he said the words.

"Tell me what I must do, Capitán."

He smiled, but it was a hard, cold smile and she felt a chill. Perhaps it was a trick.

"The first thing I want you to bring me, Senora...eyes that have truly seen."

His words hung in the air between them.

"Eyes that have seen?" Ana repeated, bewildered.

"Sí."

She stared at him. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

He didn't reply.

"Capitán?"

"If you want your husband back, return in seven days and bring me eyes that have truly seen."

As she stood, so did he. She held out her hand and he shook it. His skin was cold and dry and his black eyes radiated a curious hunger. As he opened the door for her he looked down and said, "Until next week, Senora." She lowered her eyes and passed through the doorway, walking down the corridor. There was another woman sitting on the bench, waiting as Ana had done.

She walked through the bright midday streets, clenching everything in her body tight and tense, holding herself together. And then she reached the theatre again, and the sight of those familiar doors was too much. She leant against them, the metal grille hot against her forehead, and the tears spasmed through her. The statues on top of the building looked down impassively and passing strangers glanced at her, but nobody stopped, or even broke their stride. Crying women were a fairly unremarkable sight since the war began.

Glasgow, January 1937

He'd heard about the meeting from Edward and the two of them went along on the Friday afternoon to Shettleston Cross. Michael had been following events in Spain since July. He knew that men from Britain had gone to join the armed resistance to the uprising and he'd thought of going once or twice, usually at the end of another fruitless day of tramping the streets, looking for work. But the meeting was the first time Michael heard someone who'd been there speak about it, and something just clicked for him. Afterwards, walking home along the Gallowgate, he realised that he had decided, almost without knowing it.

"I'm going to join up."

Edward stopped in his tracks. "You serious?"

"Aye."

"Going to fight? In the International Brigades?"

"Aye." Michael could feel himself grinning with elation. "I'll go to the Communist Party headquarters. They're coordinating the volunteers. They'll organise a passage to Spain for me."

Edward whistled. "Fight the fascists on their own ground, eh?"

His whole body was prickling with excitement. "I'm going to do it, Edward. I'm going to go."

They started walking again, Edward shaking his head. "Bloody hell. But your man was right at that meeting, what he was saying. It's a fight worth having. I wish..."

Michael grinned. "Jealous?"

Edward clapped him on the back. "I'd be there in a heartbeat if it wasn't for Marie and the wee one. You're bloody right I'm jealous!"

"Well there's nothing holding me back."

"What about Mammy? I doubt she'll be happy."

"I suppose I'll tell her at dinner."

"Tonight?"

Michael shrugged. "When we get home, aye."

All eight of the family were there when Edward and Michael arrived back. Kathleen had come round with the babies, Conn and Fiachra, who were crawling about underfoot. Manus and their da were in the middle of an argument about the paper.

"I was reading that!"

“When I came in it was sitting on the table.”

Michael tossed Manus his copy of the Daily Worker. “Here,” he said. “They were giving them out at the Spain meeting.” He crossed the kitchen to where his mother was standing at the stove and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “All right Mammy?” he said. “Do you need a hand with anything?”

“I never saw you were in, a leanbh. Would you pull out the table and the bench and put the plates out?”

“Here, I’ll give you a hand.” Michael and Edward took an end of the table each and pulled it out from under the window.

“Edward, I didn’t know you were coming at all, else I would’ve sent Nora for eight fish instead of seven. Where’s Marie tonight?”

“She’s away to her mam’s with the wee one. I met Michael for the meeting so I thought I’d come back for the dinner.”

“And how was your meeting?”

Michael and Edward exchanged glances. “Well,” began Michael, but he was interrupted by his da’s voice.

“Get up that stair, you!” he was shouting out of the window.

They heard the bang of the close door. “Standing out there making butterfly eyes at Patsy McFadden and the fish going cold in her hand,” his da said, shaking his head and picking Conn up. “That girl’s the biggest flirt this side of the Clyde.”

Their mam crossed the room with the bowl of potatoes and put it on the table. “Well it’s not my family she gets it from,” she said, winking at Edward and Michael.

Nora burst through the door, pink-cheeked from the cold. She’d taken after their father, like Edward, with fair hair and blue eyes. Manus, Michael, Kathleen and Annie were all dark like their mother. They all started settling themselves around the table, unwrapping the newspaper, the smell of fried fish and vinegar filling the room. Kathleen started mashing up a couple of tatties for the twins. Fiachra was on her knee and his plump hands reached out across the table, grasping at the air. Michael stretched over and pressed him on the nose. He made a long gurgling sound and smiled.

“Here, Da, take this for Conn,” she said, passing a plate of mash across to him.

“Michael, would you fetch Annie? She’s in the room, reading.”

Michael went into the back room where him, Manus, Nora and Annie slept. Annie had pulled all the covers off his and Manus’ bed and was underneath a mound of bedclothes.

She was the youngest, only eleven. She'd been a late baby, a surprise. Now all that could be seen of her was a dark head and the top of a book.

"What are you doing under all those covers?"

"It's cold in here."

"The fire's on in the kitchen, why aren't you through there?"

"It was too noisy to read."

"Well come on through now, Nora's back with the dinner."

When he sat back down at the table with the rest of the family the enormity of his decision hit him. But a thrill went through him as well. Tomorrow he'd go to the Communist Party offices on Ingram Street and put his name down.

"You could've got some chips," Manus grumbled.

"Once you start paying into the house you can buy the chips!" said Nora.

"Nora," his mam said, her voice sharp. "There's no need for that. Here Manus, have a tattie."

Michael felt the familiar sting of shame. He was out of work, same as Manus, had been for almost three years though not for want of trying.

"So how was the meeting?" his da asked.

Edward glanced at Michael. "Fine," he said, his voice casual.

"Did you see the pictures in the paper?" his mam asked. "Terrible. I've never seen anything like it. Those poor women. It's a black disgrace, that's what it is."

There was moment of silence, everyone busy at their food. Michael put down his fork and knife. "I've decided I'm going to volunteer."

"For what?" Nora asked.

"To fight in Spain. To help the Republic."

His mam's fork clattered on to her plate. "You're what?"

"Really? You're going to volunteer?" His da's tone was harder to read.

"I am," Michael said, that bubble of excitement swelling inside him again.

Annie looked up at him. "You're going to fight in the war?"

"No he is not," his mam said, standing up from the table.

"Nuala, calm yourself," his da said.

"How can I calm myself? He's going to go away and get killed in another country's war? How can you be so calm?"

"It's not a civil war," said Edward, "that's the point. Hitler and Mussolini are helping Franco. It's them against us, Mammy, the fascists against the working class. If they

win in Spain, they'll come to Britain. It's only a matter of time. We're taking the fight to them, making a better future for everyone."

"Don't you be encouraging him," she said.

"He's not, Mammy, it's my own decision," said Michael. "But he is right."

"He's got a point," said his da. "It's something to be proud of, a son who'll stand up and fight for what he believes in."

His mam sat down at the table and put her head in her hands. "I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"Well what about Mick?" his da asked. "Sure didn't he do the same thing?"

Mick was his mam's brother, Michael his namesake. He'd been part of the Irish Republican Army, captured and executed fifteen years ago during the War of Independence.

"And I saw my mother's heart broken over it," she said.

Michael put his hand on her arm. "I've made up my mind, Mammy."

The morning of his departure had finally arrived. He climbed over the bottom of the bed so he wouldn't have to clamber over Manus. It was still dark outside. The mice were scratching inside the walls again and Michael stamped his foot to shut them up. Nora and Annie's bed was empty, the covers rumpled at the bottom. He pulled his clothes on quickly, shivering, and sat down on the edge of their bed to put on his father's boots, tying the leather laces tightly. They'd argued over the boots a few nights before.

"I'm not taking the boots off your feet, Da."

"I've a feeling you'll be glad of them over there. Sure isn't a good pair of boots the one thing a soldier needs?"

"They'll probably give us our own boots when we get there." This wasn't true, in fact David at Party headquarters had told him to try and get hold of a good pair of boots before he left, but Michael had been round the cheaper cobblers and every pawnshop in the city and hadn't managed to find a pair he could afford. He didn't want to shame his father by asking for money the family didn't have, so he lied. "They're too big for me anyway."

"So you'll stuff the toes with newspaper. Take a few copies of the Daily Worker with you, why don't you, there's plenty of them lying about the place."

"No, Da. You need them for work."

"The papers? Aye, I suppose it's that quiet at the yards, there's not much else to do apart from read."

Michael smiled. "The boots."

“I’ll get another pair from somewhere. Call them an early birthday present.”

His tone had been light but Michael could hear the sadness underneath and so he gave in. Now he tied the laces tightly and lifted his parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. He’d packed the night before - a couple of shirts and a toothbrush, as Peter had advised.

When he walked into the kitchen the small room seemed crowded. Edward was standing in front of the fire, hands behind his back. It was normal for him to come round in the mornings to meet their da for the walk to the shipyards. They’d tried to get Michael in when he’d lost his place at the bevellers a couple of years back, but they’d been laying people off at the yard for months, so he’d no chance. Nora and Annie were sitting on the edge of the boxbed, the wooden doors swung open on either side of them, still in their nightdresses and nursing cups of tea. Kathleen had come round as well, the twins with her. She was by the fire, rocking wee Conn, who was still half asleep. Annie was yawning and swinging her legs. His father was crouched in front of the fire, carefully building it up with small pieces of coal from the meagre supply in the bucket. His mother turned from over the stove, Fiachra on her hip, and smiled.

“Sit yourself down, a leanbh, and I’ll bring you your breakfast over.”

Annie climbed down off the boxbed and came to sit next to Michael. She slipped her hand into his and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ve got to go, Annie. You know I do. I waited for Christmas, didn’t I?”

“But I don’t want you to.”

His mother brought over a plate to the table. Tattie scones, an egg and three slices of bacon.

“Now leave him eat, Annie. He’s a long journey ahead of him.”

“Thanks Mammy.”

She sat down at the table, her long thin fingers wrapped round a mug of tea. “What time is it you’ve to be at the station for?”

“David told me eight. The train leaves at half past.”

His father got up from the fireside. “You’ve plenty of time. It’s not a long walk.”

Nora came over and pinched a slice of bacon off his plate.

“Nora! Will you leave that alone! Who knows when his next meal will be?”

“Don’t worry Mam,” Michael said, his mouth full of food, “I’m sure they’ll feed us.”

“What kind of food do they eat in Spain?” Annie asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, wiping a piece of bread round his plate.

“Was Mary upset last night?” asked Nora, twisting her head round to look at him, a sly expression on her face. Kathleen looked up with interest.

“No,” Michael said uncomfortably. She had been upset, crying when they’d kissed goodbye at the entrance to her close. Her face had looked lumpen and blotchy in the streetlight and he’d realised again that he’d never love her the way he’d loved Leila. As soon as she went inside he’d wiped the moisture of her tears from his face before starting for home.

“Mary’s a nice girl,” said his mother, looking at him keenly. There was a slight pause. “Have you heard from that other one at all since she went away to London?”

Michael had already thought of looking Leila up at the ballet school when he was in London. He still remembered the name of the place, even after three years, but had decided against it.

“Will you all leave the boy to his breakfast,” said his father. “He’s away to a war and you’re all getting on at him about some daft wee lassie!”

After he’d finished his breakfast there wasn’t much else to do.

“I’ve something for you,” his mother said, crossing the room and pulling out one of the dresser drawers. “I know Father McKenna doesn’t approve of you going to fight,” she said, “but I asked him for a miraculous medal, and he gave me St. Michael, he’s the patron saint of soldiers.” She pressed it into his hand. “Keep it in your pocket, a leanbh, and you’ll come back to us safe and sound.”

“I will,” he said, squeezing her thin frame tightly. “Sure I’ll be home by the summer.”

His family gathered round as he went out the door, calling their goodbyes, and their voices echoed down the stinking darkness of the close, only fading when he stepped out into the street.

As he went down Cathcart Road his step quickened. He walked round on to Gorbals Street, passing by the old theatre. Leila had danced in a show there just before she left for London. Michael had gone to see her. He’d sat slouched down in the red velvet seats, feeling out of place. He wondered again about looking her up at the ballet school in London, before putting the thought of his head. He wanted to concentrate on the walk to the station. It might be a long time before he saw these streets again. He crossed over the river, the water grey,

reflecting the dawn sky. The wind was cold and he hunched his shoulders against it, turning up the collar of his coat and thrusting his hands deep into the pockets. His fingers met the metal of the medal and he turned it over and over as he walked along the Clydeside, wondering how many days it would take to get to Spain. He still couldn't believe today was the day. David, the speaker at the meeting, had been at the Party headquarters when he'd come to sign up, and had told him it would take about a week. He'd said that the border was closed, but the French guards had been turning a blind eye to men slipping across at the beginning of the long climb over the Pyrenees.

Michael had never left Glasgow before, apart from trips to Troon on the fair day and a couple of summers in Donegal. He knew these streets like the back of his hand. He could walk them with his eyes closed, able to tell where he was by the smell of the air, the sound of the street, the stones under his feet. And he was leaving. He passed the end of the alley where Paddy's Market took place, heaps of rags and damaged goods, hard faced women picking over the piles like crows. The air would be thick with the sound of voices calling to one another, comments made with the tongue in the cheek, looking to get a rise out of someone, laughter and hard jokes the only thing that made the shared poverty of these streets bearable. Now, though, the lane was empty apart from a drunk slumped under the archway. The smell of the river filled the air. Michael looked around him at the buildings, the soot stained gold and red of the sandstone, the grey slate roofs, the brown river sliding by. It seemed inconceivable to him that in a couple of weeks he'd be in Spain.

He arrived at the entrance to Central Station and leant against the doorway. He took his cigarettes from his pocket and tapped one out of the packet, striking a match and keeping his eyes on the flame as it trembled and was sucked towards the tip of the cigarette. The paper crackled as he inhaled, the smoke coiling down through his throat as he watched Gordon Street wake up. Shopgirls, demure in their coats and hats, were hurrying along the pavement, their gloved hands swinging at their sides. The shutters of shops were being unlocked and pushed back. There was a boy selling newspapers from a stand, holding them out to the men in suits and bowler hats who were streaming out of the station. The name of the paper was distorted beyond recognition, called out so often in the thin boyish voice that it had become a series of sounds instead of a word. As Michael glanced at the headlines a hand slapped him on the back. He turned around to see Peter, whom he'd met at the office three days before.



“A fine morning for a journey, that’s for sure,” he said as way of greeting. There was another man standing next to him, tall and broad shouldered, with a working man’s cap on his head and dark hair that curled from beneath it.

“Johnny Hay.” His accent was rougher than Peter’s but his grasp was firm and his smile friendly.

“Michael O’ Donnell.”

“Glad to meet you.”

“Right lads,” said Peter, rummaging through his pockets for the tickets, “let’s go get our seats, shall we?”

The station was busy with the early morning rush, people hurrying down the platforms, trains pulling in and out with loud whistles. The London train sat at the far end of the station, stretched out alongside the platform. Their compartment was empty. Michael stowed his bag on one of the racks above their heads and sat down next to the window, facing the opposite direction from the way the train would be running. He’d been excited all the way to the station, but he suddenly wanted to see the streets of his city for as long as they were visible, watching them fall away from the window as he travelled down into England, making his way across the continent to a war in a country he’d never been to. The thought came to him that he could still change his mind, jump off the train, walk home through the morning bustle of the city. Annie would be away to school, her satchel heavy with books, and his father and Edward to work. Manus would probably be back in his bed and Nora would be hanging out the window gossiping with the Malone sisters across the way. His mother would be washing clothes out the back close, maybe with Kathleen giving her a hand, the twins in the basket beside them. The train gave a long, high whistle, jolting him from his thoughts.

“Off we go, lads,” said Johnny, and Michael turned his thoughts away from his family and on to Spain.

## The Artist

Ana walked down the stairs quietly, avoiding the steps that creaked, but it was no use. “Is that you Ana? Where are you going?”

“I’m going – I’m just going for a walk,” said Ana. A lie, but it was too complicated to explain.

“Come in for a moment,” said Elisa, “and have a cup of tea.”

Ana sighed but went in anyway. “How are you Elisa?”

“My legs are bad today,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“I’ll make the tea then?” said Ana, smiling to herself.

“I heard a strange story from Pasquala,” said Elisa.

“Oh?”

“The friend of her niece, you know the one that works in that office?”

“Yes,” said Ana, filling the kettle.

“Well the two of them were out at a dance. For the soldiers, you know.”

“I wouldn’t go near them,” said Ana. “Fascist pigs.”

“Nor me, nina, nor me. But you know how that Sofia is. She’s desperate for a man ever since her mother swept over her feet.”

Ana shook her head. “What a stupid superstition.”

“Not if you believe in it. My mother touched my sister’s feet with a broom once when she was sweeping the stairs, and she never married.”

Ana handed Elisa her tea. “Anyway, tell me the story.”

“So the two of them are out at this dance and there’s a soldier there. An officer, or a captain, something like this. He’s tall, dark, handsome. He comes across and asks Sofia’s friend to dance.”

“Yes?”

“They dance all night. He’s very charming, attentive, fetches her drinks, and he’s a great dancer. At the end of the night he offers to walk her home. They get back to her house and they’re standing in the doorway. When he leans in for a kiss she looks down, acting shy, and she sees that instead of feet, he’s got a pair of cloven hoofs.”

Ana started laughing. “What?”

“Cloven hoofs, instead of feet.”

“It was probably all the drinks he bought her.”

“No,” said Elisa, her voice solemn, “no, when she looked back up he’d vanished. She went in and told the story to her mother. They put a cross under her pillow that night and holy water round the mirrors and windows, but in the morning she was dead in her bed.”

“What?” said Ana.

“Dead as a stone,” said Elisa. “The funeral’s tomorrow.”

“But she’s the same age as me,” said Ana.

“I know. It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

“The poor family.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Ana finished her tea and put the cup down on the table.

“I’ll pop in later,” she said.

“All right, nina,” said Elisa, “enjoy your walk.”

It took Ana an hour to get to the artists’ quarter from her street, through the centre of the city, past the university, through the park and over the river. One of the oldest parts of the city, it was a tangle of small cobblestoned plazas and narrow, medieval streets that led down to the ocean. Before the war she had often come here with Frasco to eat in the small restaurants that lined the streets or to meet their friends in Gauguins for drinks and tapas. In those days it had been a lively area, slightly seedy but full of colour. Because of its proximity to the port there was a brothel on every plaza along with the customary church, and prostitutes plied their trade from doorways and balconies, their voices mingling with the bells ringing out for the evening Mass. Fortune tellers and beggars called to the passing crowds from the side of the streets. Sculptors could be seen through the open windows of their studios, often with some naked girl before them. Artists would sit on corners offering charcoal portraits for ten pesetas next to old men selling paper cones of roasted chestnuts. Cigarette smoke and arguments about politics drifted from the dark bars that opened on to the streets.

But all of this had disappeared with the war. The restaurants and bars were closed through lack of custom. There were no fortune tellers; after two years of war, nobody wanted to know any longer what lay ahead. The brothels still existed but the girls on the balconies were no longer pert and rounded. The war had reduced them too, and they had thin, hungry faces. The sculptors and artists and musicians had been arrested or executed or had gone off to fight for the Republic.

Only one artist remained and he was the reason that Ana was there that evening. He hadn't gone to fight because, Ana imagined, of the caliper on his leg. Ana had seen him several times since the start of the war, in the centre of the city, limping along with that curious swivelling motion. She recognised him because she had often watched him drawing during those evenings with Frasco when they'd wandered through the streets, drifting back and forth through the faces and lights and music. He was the best of all the portrait artists, the most skilled and therefore the most pleasing to watch. He would sketch a portrait in minutes, the face appearing as if by magic on the paper, an exact reproduction of the stranger sitting in front of him. Through some mysterious alchemy of charcoal, paper and artistry, his portraits were more than just faces; they somehow captured the essence of the person. She'd thought of him yesterday, as she'd been sitting on the balcony, turning the captain's words over in her head. If she could persuade the artist to sell her a self portrait, that might satisfy the captain's bizarre request.

She hunched her shoulders against the wind that whistled through the empty streets and the weight of the basket pressed down on the crook of her elbow. Inside was food, her rations from the last five days to be used, she hoped, as payment. The plazas once thronged by bright, laughing crowds were peopled now only by their memory and the empty streets had an eerie feel. Ana walked for a good hour, crossing back and forth. She was tempted to go home, but at the same time she was very conscious of her appointment with the captain, in two days time. She needed to find the artist today. There was a woman smoking in the doorway of one of the bordellos. The paint was peeling from the door and the curtains hung limp and faded at the window. The woman looked at Ana with dark, made up eyes, her lips drawn together as she sucked the smoke in, and spoke as Ana approached.

"You won't find any work here, sister. The men who would pay are all away to war, and the soldiers, on the rare occasions they come here, don't pay for their pleasure."

Ana could feel the blood rising to her cheeks and she shook her head. "No," she said, "I'm looking for someone."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "You're at the wrong house. There's nobody inside, sister, except the padrona and a couple of the girls."

"Do you know the artist who wears the caliper?" Ana asked. The woman nodded. "I'm looking for him. Do you know where he lives?"

"He used to live on Callejón Paraíso. I don't know if he still lives there now. We don't see him often anymore. But then, who has money for paintings these days?" Her

shoulders lifted in an expressive shrug as she blew a thin plume of smoke into the air above Ana's head.

"Is Callejón Paraíso the narrow street with the fountain at the corner?"

"Yes."

"Is it close? Can you tell me the way from here?"

"It's not far, sister, only two streets away. Go to the corner, turn left, and then take the first right. He lives on the top floor, above the flower shop. Well, it's closed now. Artists and florists don't do well out of war. But the sign is still up."

"Thank you," Ana said.

"I modelled for him once, you know."

Ana turned back, more out of politeness than curiosity.

"I used to go to the florists every few days, for flowers to put in our hair. The cheapest ones, carnations, only a céntimo each. Simona wore pink, Antonia wore white. Marguerita wore yellow. I always wore red."

"And you modelled for the artist?"

"He came down the stairs one day when I was standing, my arms full of flowers, and he asked me to model for him, just like that."

The woman offered Ana a draw of her cigarette. The smoke was as sharp as needles, stinging the back of her throat.

"It was strange. His eyes...Nobody, no other man, has ever looked at me the way he did. My hair fell over my arms but when I moved to brush it back, he stopped me."

"Did he show you what he'd drawn?"

"The next time I went for flowers, he'd left a message with Giacomo for me to come upstairs and see the picture."

"Was it good?"

The woman paused before answering. "It's difficult to describe."

Ana waited.

"It was painful, somehow, to look at."

"Why?"

"When we look in a mirror we see our own reflection of ourselves. When we look into someone's eyes we see their reflection of us. But that painting...too much truth can be difficult, to see yourself so exposed."

Ana raised her eyebrows and the woman jerked her head at the doorway behind her.

“When you consider what I do, after all. But for the first time in a long time, looking at that painting, I thought about moving away, starting again, on a blank canvas.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.” The woman shrugged. “This is my life. And besides, things weren’t so bad in those days. I had my sisters, a roof over my head. We weren’t as hungry as we are now.”

Ana said nothing but she was aware of the weight of the basket over her arm.

“When I was standing in his studio, the flowers I was holding were all different colours, pink and red and yellow and white. But in the picture, he’d painted them all red.”

Ana reached into her basket and took out half a loaf of bread and an onion. She held them out.

“Thank you for your help,” she said. The woman accepted the loaf but pressed the onion back into her hand.

“Thank you for the bread, sister.”

Ana smiled and began to walk away.

“Why are you looking for him anyway?” Her voice was thin on the wind and her words were snatched away like the smoke from her cigarette.

Ana turned around. “I’m looking for eyes,” she called, “that have truly seen.”

When she passed the fountain it was dry, only a few cigarette butts in the bowl. The flower shop was shut, as the prostitute had said. There were a few dead flowers in the doorway but no carnations. Through the open doorway next to the shop she could make out the beginnings of a stairwell that rose up into darkness. She climbed the stone stairs slowly, her hand on the wall for support, brushing against the curls of peeling paint. The only light came from a small grimy skylight far above her and she stepped carefully, wary of tripping. It was very quiet. She could have been the only person in the whole building. When she reached the top landing there were two doors, with no names on them. Ana chose the one on the left and knocked. There was no answer. When she turned to try the other door it was open and there was a man looking at her. The room behind him was bright and she couldn’t see the expression on his face.

“Are you looking for Belia? She went away to Madrid at the start of the war. That apartment is empty now.”

“I’m looking for the artist.”

He opened the door wider and a ray of sunlight cut through the darkness of the landing. She could see the shape of the caliper under the dark material of his trousers and the paint on his hands.

“That’s me. Come in.”

Her eyes took a few moments to adjust to the light. The wooden floorboards of the room were scuffed and dusty and the bed in the corner was sagging, the covers worn and stained, but the wide windows that let in the light were gleaming and the walls were covered in paintings and sketches. She looked for the painting of the prostitute with her arms full of red carnations, but couldn’t see it.

“How can I help you, Senora?” He gestured towards one of two chairs that sat under the windows while she searched for the words to explain. “Please, sit down.” She put the basket on the floor and turned to face him.

“My name is Ana Valladares,” she said, “and I need a portrait.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. She knew that he had noticed her worn boots, her thin shawl, her faded skirt. She knew that she didn’t look like the kind of woman who could afford to spend money on something as frivolous as a portrait.

“I would like to buy a self portrait from you,” she hastened to explain. “I need something that represents eyes that have truly seen.”

“An unusual request. What for?”

“It’s very important.”

“I hardly ever draw self portraits and I’ve never sold any I have done.”

“I don’t have any money,” she said, “but I have food that I can give you.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Please,” she said. “This means everything to me. My husband...he is in prison, and I can’t explain how, but if I have this portrait I will be one step closer to getting him out. I know that sounds strange,” she said. “I can’t explain but I’m telling the truth.” She picked up the basket of food and held it out to him. “Please.”

He rubbed his hand over his stubble and shook his head slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This request makes me uncomfortable.”

“I understand, but...”

But his face was closed against her and he shook his head again.

“I’m sorry, Senora.”

Hunger burned in Ana’s gut and her pleas still hung in the air between them: she had wasted a whole day in her search. She slammed the basket down on the floor.

“My husband,” she said, “has fought from the first day of the uprising and now he is rotting away in a Fascist prison. All I ask from you is a sketch, a stupid little sketch that I need, not for myself, but because the Capitán has asked me to find him eyes that have truly seen. This is what my husband fought against, the power that this man has to force me to act upon his whim, to try and comply with this ridiculous request, only so I can see my husband again.” Her voice broke but she continued.

“If you were so talented,” she said, “if you really understood what you see, you would see the desperation in my face and you wouldn’t be so grudging. I only have two days left and I wasted the other five saving up food because I didn’t want to come here empty-handed, asking for favours or begging.”

“I didn’t say that you were, Senora.”

“Well,” she said, snatching up the basket in a sweeping motion, “I’ll leave you to your art.”

In the dim light of the stairwell she sat down on the steps with her arms around the basket. She didn’t hear his footsteps coming down the stairs after her and was only made aware of his presence by his hand on her shoulder. He lowered himself awkwardly on to the step next to her.

“I would like to hear your whole story, Senora.” His voice was soft, close to her ear, disturbingly intimate in that dim, cramped space, and it crumbled her defenses.

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Ana told him more than she meant to, not just about the captain but about everything; the agony of that first day when Frasco had left for Madrid and the ache that came from missing him every day. She talked about the disapproval of her mother and her older sisters, the marriage of Aurelia to a man who wouldn’t allow Ana and Frasco in his house. The artist listened, his eyes fastened on hers, and they seemed to draw the words out of her. She told him about Gabriel, the man who had come to see her to tell her that Frasco was in prison, and about Teresa and Federico, and the nightmares she’d had since the start of the war. She didn’t complain, it wasn’t a lamentation, but she spoke of the facts of her life now, reduced and reduced again to fear and hunger and boredom and loneliness and the waiting, the endless waiting.

When she finally stopped, he stood up and walked over to the window. He spoke without turning round.



“I will help you, Ana,” he said. “I will give you a self portrait and perhaps it will satisfy this captain. But perhaps it will not.” He turned around and looked at her. “Have you thought about that?”

But Ana wasn’t listening. She put her arms around him. His body was tense and uncomfortable against hers, but at that moment she didn’t care.

“Thank you, thank you so much.”

“Come back tomorrow afternoon,” he said, “and it will be ready for you.”

London, January 1937

Peter had gone to the party offices at Covent Garden to pick up their train tickets for Paris. He'd left them at the station with strict instructions not to speak to anyone, especially men who looked like they might be on their way to fight in Spain.

"The Non Intervention men'll be watching for large groups," he said. "You don't want get arrested at the very start."

They'd been waiting a couple of hours, leaning against a wall at the side of the station. Every so often, when a pretty girl went by, Johnny would nudge Michael and grin, his eyes following her.

"I bet the women in Spain are lookers, what do you think?" he said, blowing out a last lungful of smoke and tossing the end of his cigarette to the ground in a shower of sparks.

Michael smiled uncomfortably, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck. "Come on, all that black hair, dark eyes, that fiery Spanish spirit?"

"I don't know," Michael said.

"You don't know?"

"Well, I mean, I suppose so."

"Those militiawomen...I tell you, Mickey, I wouldn't mind women like that, overalls on, taking up their guns and away to fight the Fascists in the streets, cool as you like. Aye, they're the women for me."

Michael wasn't sure why Johnny had started calling him Mickey but he didn't mind. It reminded him of Manus.

"You're not married then?" Michael asked. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he regretted them, worried that he'd sounded prudish. It was just like the glassworks where he'd done his apprenticeship. He felt like he was sixteen again, self-conscious and tongue-tied among the rough jokes and easy companionship of men older than him. But Johnny didn't seem to notice his awkwardness. He was gazing across the station and for a moment Michael thought he hadn't heard him, but then he spoke.

"No," he said. "Reckon it wouldn't be fair to womankind in general to restrict myself to just one girl – there's plenty of Johnny Hay to go around."

Michael laughed. Johnny took a quick look at his left hand.

"You're not married yourself?" he said, and when Michael shook his head he carried on, "Any sweethearts left behind?"

Michael thought of Mary, the tears sliding down her round face when she'd said goodbye to him. "Nobody special," he said.

"Well we'll have to find you a militiawoman too," said Johnny.

"Aye, maybe," he said.

"So were you working back home?" said Johnny.

Michael shook his head. "I had a job in a glassworks."

"The one up on Firhill Road?"

"That's the one. But I got laid off, a year after my apprenticeship."

"Aye?"

"Aye. Been looking since but there's no work anywhere."

"I know what you mean."

"Were you not working either?"

Johnny shrugged. "The odd job, here and there. Enough to get by on."

"No wonder they're calling them the hungry thirties, eh?"

"You've a point there. Still, I bet Franco's boys'll keep us busy enough."

All through the station there were men standing in twos and threes and Michael wondered if they, like him, were headed for Spain. They weren't saying much to each other, at least the groups that he could see, most standing with their hands in their pockets or smoking, their faces tense and expectant under their caps. He saw the station master standing with two men who looked like plain clothes policemen, glancing in their direction, and his heart began to beat faster. He turned his eyes away from them and tried to look nonchalant. Johnny, who'd followed the direction of his gaze, shrugged his shoulders.

"All we say if they ask any questions is that we're going to Paris for the weekend, that's what Peter told us. Don't worry Mickey, we'll get a crack at Franco's lads yet!"

Peter appeared in front of them. "Right, here are the tickets. London to Paris, on the Newhaven to Dieppe ferry, third class, weekend return. The train to Newhaven's leaving from platform seven, I think, in twenty minutes."

The platform seemed strangely quiet with only two other men waiting at the far end and no sign of the train.

"I guess not many people are headed for Newhaven," Michael said, nodding along the empty platform. Peter was checking his ticket, frowning.

"Aye it's strange, isn't it?" he said. "Maybe I should go and check."

A porter wheeled a trolley past them, his quick eyes looking them over. He stopped and said, "You Brigadiers are on the wrong platform."

Michael and Johnny looked at one another and started laughing. "The ticket says platform seven but," said Peter, showing it to the porter.

"It's been changed to platform five, mate. It's written up on the board at the entrance. Don't worry, you've still got ten minutes before it's due to leave."

"Right, thanks very much," said Peter.

"So much for being inconspicuous," said Michael, as the three of them headed along to platform five.

Peter shook his head. "At least he wasn't a policeman, eh?"

They arrived at the right platform and made their way along. It was much busier and Michael saw a few of the men he'd noticed hanging about earlier. A couple of them grinned at him before looking away. He looked up and down the platform, and through a gap in the people waiting he saw a girl with hair the exact colour of Leila's, a dark coppery red. Her face was turned away, she was looking up the platform towards the incoming train. He couldn't take his eyes off her hair, the only bright thing on the whole platform in the grey January light that filtered down through the glass panels of the ceiling. As the train drew in she turned her head, as if conscious of his gaze. High cheekbones, a long straight nose, a full mouth bare of lipstick and incredulity in her grey eyes.

"Michael?" The sound was lost in the rumble of the train pulling in but he could see her lips forming the shape of his name.

"Leila!" he called, pushing into the crowd. A hand caught at his sleeve.

"Mickey, where're you off to?" It was Johnny, looking at him with puzzlement.

"I'm just going up the platform - an old friend. I'll get you on the train!" Michael said, pulling away from him. A surge of people pushed forward to the open doors and Michael lost sight of her for a minute or two and panicked. Maybe he'd get there and she'd have vanished, a mirage.

But when the crowd parted she was still standing there, waiting for him, wide eyed with shock. When he reached her he stopped, unsure of what to do, what to say. She stepped forward and put her arms around his neck, hugging him, and he caught the familiar scent of her skin. Drawing back, they took a long look at one another. She looked older, her face a little thinner. Her hair was different too. When he'd known her it had licked her elbows in long, loose waves, but she'd cut it short. It curled around her face from beneath her small blue hat.

"You cut your hair," he said.

“This is like a dream,” she said slowly, her eyes on his face. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way to...to Paris,” he said, conscious of the people all around him.

“But I am too,” she said, shaking her head.

He nodded towards the train and picked up her case. “We’d better get on. Where are you sitting?”

“I’m in second class.”

He fumbled for the ticket with his free hand. “I’m in third class, I think.”

“Why are you going to Paris?”

“I’ll explain on the train,” he said, standing by the door.

She climbed the steps up in to the carriage with the same dancer’s grace that had captivated him the first night he’d seen her at a dancehall in the centre of town. He’d been there with Manus and a couple of his friends that Michael didn’t know too well. While the leading dancers had been swirling across the floor during the opening dance, Manus had nudged him and nodded towards the girls sitting on the opposite side of the hall.

“Here, Mickey, I think she’s a notion for you,” he’d said. There was a red haired girl looking over at him, but when he met her gaze she smiled and lowered her eyes. “Well? Are you not getting up to ask her for a dance?”

He’d turned eighteen the previous November, but was still painfully shy around girls. The thought of being one of the first to cross the wide expanse of polished floorboards to the women filled him with terror, but he tried to hide it, his tone offhand. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe later I will.”

He knew that Manus wasn’t fooled by his nonchalance, but his brother was a wind up merchant, so Michael wasn’t surprised when he stood up, draining his beer. “Fine well, if you’re not wanting to dance with her I’ll ask her myself. Sure maybe it’s me she’s been making the butterfly eyes at.”

Manus swaggered across the dancefloor, hopeful eyes watching his progress. Relatives had always said Michael was the handsomer of the two, but in truth they were very similar, the same dark curls and green eyes inherited from their mother. Michael lacked the charm that made Manus irresistible to women, though, his easy way of talking, his confidence. He watched through half closed eyes as the girl stood up and walked out on to the floor with Manus. More and more couples joined them on the floor but Michael kept sight of them, her flame coloured hair a beacon among the other dancers. She danced well, her

movements light and graceful. He went through to the lounge to get a couple more beers, standing with his back to the dancefloor. When Manus returned, grinning, Michael nudged his beer across the table to him.

“Her name’s Leila,” Manus said.

Michael didn’t reply.

“What a dancer! I’d have stayed on if I hadn’t seen you sitting here green with jealousy.”

Michael took a swig of his beer.

“Ah, I’m only winding you up, Mickey. Away up and ask her for a dance.”

“I told you, Manus, I’ll ask her later.”

Half an hour went by and Michael didn’t move from the table. He didn’t join in the banter with Manus and his friends, too busy watching her dance. Leila. He turned the name over in his mouth, the two syllables, the way they rose and fell. She stayed on, men asking for her next dance before she’d even left the floor. When the band took a break she returned to her table with her friends. She met Michael’s eye once more but this time he was the one to look away, the blood rising to his cheeks. The next song was ladies choice. When Manus saw her approaching their table he elbowed Michael and grinned.

“Guess she took a wee fancy to me after all, if she’s coming back for more!”

But it was Michael she stopped in front of, smiling nervously. “Would you like to dance? It’s ladies choice.”

After that first dance they stayed on the floor, and every time someone approached to cut in Leila politely refused. They didn’t talk much. Michael couldn’t think what to say, too conscious of her turning waist under his hand, the heat of her body against his. She danced beautifully, responding to slightest pressure of his hand, anticipating his every move. When the music finished they stood looking at one another.

“Will...can I get you up the road?” Michael asked after a moment, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

She smiled and nodded. “That would be nice.”

“Where do you stay?”

“Next to Kelvingrove Park, in the west end.”

Michael’s eyes widened. Views of the park were expensive, the tenements up there roomy and spacious, with high ceilings and wide windows clustered with hot house plants.

“Where do you live?”

“I’m from Govanhill. Cathcart Road.”

“Oh, I have a friend who lives there.”

“Oh.”

There was a pause, and she smiled. “I’ll just get my coat,” she said, turning away from him. Michael hurried back to the table to grab his jacket.

“Where’re you running off to then? Getting your one up the road, are you?” Manus was a little drunk, his voice slightly louder than it should have been.

“I am. Where are you going?”

“We’re heading down to a party in the Gorbals, someone that Jimmy knows. Why don’t you come down, bring the girl?”

Michael had been to a couple of those tenement parties in the Gorbals. They always turned wild at some point, too much drink taken and fights starting. “Nah, don’t fancy it. I’ll tell Mammy you’ll be in late.”

“Right so, see you after then.”

Leila was waiting for him at the door, her coat on and buttoned up to the neck, that bright hair spilling over the collar. He offered her a cigarette and she took one, balancing it between her long, elegant fingers. He struck a match and lit her cigarette before lighting his own, and they set off up the road, Leila linking her arm through his in a very natural way. It was a warm night, the air thick and sweet against their skin as if weighed down by the events of the day, exhausted by circulating through the city.

“So what do you do, Leila?” he asked as they turned on to Sauchiehall Street. It was busy, the dancehalls having spilled out on to the streets. Girls in bright summer dresses stood in groups, their laughter winging out across the lower murmur of the men who stood in shirtsleeves, their jackets slung over their arms, passing hip flasks back and forth. Behind them angry shouts flared bright and hot and Michael speeded up a little.

“I’m training to be a dancer,” she said. “Well, I’ve been at the ballet school for a year now.”

“I should have guessed that,” he said. “You dance very well.”

“Oh,” she said, blushing slightly, “well I’ve got another two years to go.”

There was a slight pause and Michael listened to the sounds of the city. It was quieter now. They’d left the crowds behind and were walking along the emptier part of the street, up towards the cross.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I work in the glassworks, in the bevelling workshop,” he said.

“And do you like it?”

“Yes, I do.” She asked him more about the workshop, and Michael, who was usually so reticent, found himself telling her about all the different characters in the workshop as they walked along the street. From there the conversation drifted on to their families, where they’d gone to school, what pictures they liked, and before he knew it Leila had stopped outside a tiled close.

“Well, thank you for walking me home,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He paused, not quite sure what to do next. “Are you... Would you like to go to the pictures with me next week? I mean, you don’t have to, you’re maybe busy with classes, but if you’re not we could go to the pictures.” He could feel his face getting hot.

“I’d like that. What day would you like to go?”

“Um, I don’t know. Tuesday? Wednesday?”

“Wednesday would be good.”

“So what picturehouse should we go to? And what film do you want to see? Do you want to meet me there or shall I pick you up? I mean...”

“My parents insist on meeting anyone who takes me out, so I’m afraid you’ll have to pick me up,” she said, her expression slightly amused. He knew he sounded foolish.

“All right then. Wednesday it is.” He wanted to kiss her but wasn’t sure how to go about it. They stood looking at one another for a moment longer and then Leila reached up, on tiptoe, and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you for walking me home,” she said again. “I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

That had been the beginning. They’d gone out together for two years before she’d left for London, having been accepted at the most prestigious ballet school in the capital. Michael had been heartsick and resentful and a couple of months later, when they went out on strike and he found himself out of a job, he’d stopped replying to her letters, angry and ashamed. He hadn’t seen her for two and a half years and now here she was, walking along the corridor in front of him, looking into compartments for an empty seat.

“Here’s one,” she said, turning back. Michael leant forward and opened the door for her, following her into the empty compartment and stowing her case in the overhead rack.

“You’ll be alright now then,” he said, standing in the doorway.

“You’re not sitting with me?” She looked disappointed.

“I’ve only got a third class ticket,” he said.



“I bet I can persuade the conductor to let you sit with me,” she said, “if you want, that is.”

“Well, I’d better go and find the lads I’m travelling with, let them know I’m down here.”

She looked up as she unbuttoned her coat. “You don’t have to... I mean, if you’re travelling with friends, I don’t mind. I thought I’d be travelling by myself anyway, I have a book.”

“If you’d rather sit alone, it’s fine,” he said, on the defensive.

“No,” she said, twisting a strand of hair behind her ear. “I mean, it’d be nice to catch up, but if you’re with other people...”

“It’s fine, Leila. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

When he found Johnny and Peter they were sitting in a compartment two carriages along with three other men.

“I kept you a seat, Mickey,” said Johnny. “These lads are on their way to sunny Spain too. Bill and Eddie, brothers from Liverpool, and Charlie, he’s from Sheffield.”

Michael shook their hands. “Michael O’Donnell, nice to meet you,” he said to each of them. “Peter, there’s an old friend of mine from Glasgow on the train, on the way to Paris too.”

“Aye, and she’s a looker,” said Johnny, winking at him.

Peter grinned. “We’ll get you at the station in Paris then.”

Michael nodded, relieved he wouldn’t have to go into further explanation. “Right, see you then.”

As he made his way back along the corridor, there was a long, high whistle and the train began pulling out of the station. Michael stopped and stood at the window for a moment. He was a day closer to Spain but his mind was full of Leila. He still couldn’t believe that she was here, on the same train. He slid down the window and lit a cigarette. He wasn’t ready to return to the compartment just yet. The smoke was sucked out of the window as he looked at the streets of London sliding by. Two and a half years was a long time and he’d thought that he’d managed to forget her, but in that first glimpse on the platform everything had come flooding back. But they’d be in Paris in ten hours, and then they’d go their separate ways again.

Back in the compartment she was looking out the window, her legs crossed neatly at the ankles, her coat folded over the empty seat next to her. As he pulled open the door she looked round and smiled.

“I still can’t believe you’re here.”

He settled himself into the seat opposite her. “I know. So why are you headed to Paris?”

“I’ve been living there since last summer, I was just home over Christmas.”

“What are you doing over there?”

“I’m dancing for the Paris Opera Company.”

“Is it a good company?”

“It’s great. We have to work hard, but it’s what I’ve always wanted to do.”

“I know.”

There was a pause and Michael looked at her. “It’s good to see you, Leila.”

She smiled at him but there was a sadness in her face. “It’s good to see you too. I missed you when I moved away, you know. And you stopped writing to me.”

Michael tried to think of an excuse. “I’m sorry.”

“Have you – did you meet someone else?”

“No,” he said. He didn’t want to tell her that he’d started hating her, a little, for moving away.

“So why are you going to Paris?” she said after a moment.

“I’m travelling on from there,” he said.

“Where?”

“Spain.”

“But there’s a war...oh Michael, you’re going to fight, aren’t you? The International Brigades? I’ve read about it in the papers.”

He nodded and she leant forward, putting her hand on his arm.

“But you could get killed! Why – what about your family?”

“They understand. I just – I’ve read a lot about it, and I have to go, Leila. The newsreels, what they’re doing over there...it’s not right.”

“But what’s it to do with you? It’s a civil war.”

“Is it hell,” he said. “German planes and Italian soldiers? The only side not getting any outside help are the side that deserve it the most, the legally elected side.”

Leila was looking at him, frowning. As he continued she interrupted him. “When did you get so political?”

“It’s not about being political, Leila. Well, I suppose it is, in a way. It’s not right, that’s all. They’re bombing hell out of the civilians, and it’s the same fascists that run Germany and Italy. If they take Spain, it’ll be France next, and then Britain. I just feel...well, if I don’t go and fight them over there, I’ll be fighting them here before long.”

She was quiet for a minute, eyes focused on his.

“Well I don’t know much about it,” she said. “But you might get killed.”

“If I do it’ll be in a worthy cause,” he said.

“Even so,” she said. “And what about your job? They’re not easy to come by these days, by what the papers say.”

“I’m not working just now.”

“What about the glassworks?”

“They laid me off, a couple of years back.”

There was a pause.

“So how was your time at home?” Michael said, acutely conscious of the miles falling away beneath the wheels of the train, taking them ever closer to Paris and their next goodbye.

## The Brothel

When Ana arrived back at the brothel, the same woman was standing in the doorway, smoking, it seemed, the same cigarette. She raised an eyebrow as Ana drew near.

“So did you find the artist, sister?”

“I did,” said Ana.

The prostitute nodded.

“I looked for the painting you modelled for,” Ana said, “but I couldn’t see it in his studio.”

“He sold it,” she said, “to a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?”

“It was a present for his wife. Can you imagine? Me, Mercedes Escalona, a prostitute, on the wall of a lawyer’s room.”

“No,” said Ana honestly, “I can’t.”

The two women looked at one another and began to laugh. The sound rang out against the cobblestones, bright and happy in the darkening street. It felt good but strange. It felt like the first time Ana had laughed since the war began, since Frasco left. Wiping her eyes, Ana held out her hand.

“I’m Ana. Ana Valledares.”

Mercedes shook her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” She looked up at the sky and then her eyes moved back to Ana’s face. She flicked the end of her cigarette away and the glowing tip sailed in a bright arc into the street.

“Listen, sister, where do you live? It’ll be dark soon, do you have far to go?”

“La Cueva, on the north side, not far from the river.”

Mercedes reached out and took Ana’s hands. Until that moment she hadn’t realised how cold her own hands were, nor that she was shivering.

“Far to walk, this late in the day,” Mercedes said, “and you look tired, sister. You’re welcome to sleep here tonight, but I won’t be offended if you refuse.”

Ana was tired, and it was a long walk back. “You’re very kind. I will, thank you.”

“Well then, why are we standing in this chilly doorway?”

She turned and pushed open the door. Her long loose hair was suddenly caught by the wind and it leapt and fluttered against the wall of the house like a banner. From the open door came the sound of music and women’s voices. Ana followed Mercedes gratefully into the house.

A stairway twisted upwards into darkness, but Mercedes led Ana down a dim corridor and into a long, wide room, with large windows which opened out on to a courtyard full of withered plants. They looked like ghosts in the half light. Three pairs of eyes turned on her as she entered and Ana stopped and stood in the doorway, uncertain. As Mercedes made her way over to the corner of the room she announced, "This is Ana. She's sleeping here tonight."

The youngest of the three looked at Ana with a limpid blue gaze.

"I'm Simona."

Ana nodded at her, nervous. She didn't know what to do or say.

"This is Margarita," Mercedes said, gesturing at a long limbed girl sprawled over a sofa, "and this is Antonia." Antonia glanced up and nodded unsmilingly. Ana remained in the doorway for a moment until Mercedes beckoned her over to sit down on a wide, soft chair. Ana sat down, smoothed her skirt over her knees, and looked around her. The room was like a salon, with a small bar at one end, where bottles of darkly coloured glass glittered on the shelves, candles flickering among them. Most were empty, a couple with a few centimetres of liquid at the bottom. The wooden floor was highly polished. On a table next to the window stood a gramophone, spinning out the music that Ana had heard from the doorway.

"So, Ana," Simona said, leaning forward, her hair falling over the side of her face, "what brings you here this evening?"

"I was in this neighbourhood to see an artist. It took me longer than I thought it would, and I would have had to walk home in the dark, and Mercedes kindly said I could sleep here tonight instead."

"Is he your lover?"

Ana blushed. "No," she said, twisting her wedding ring round on her finger. "No, I'm married."

"Will your husband not wonder where you are tonight?" Marguerita asked, smiling mischievously.

"No, he's in prison."

"What did he do?" asked Simona, eyes wide.

"He went north to Madrid when the war began," Ana said, "to fight for the Republic. He was taken prisoner a month ago."

"Oh," said Simona. "Didn't you try to stop him going?"

"I couldn't," said Ana. "He was determined to go."

“My fiancé went too,” said Antonia, leaning forward and joining in the conversation. “He was killed a year ago.”

Mercedes and Marguerita glanced at one another.

“I’m sorry,” said Ana, looking at her.

“It’s him that should be sorry,” Antonia said, her voice bitter. “It’s him that chose to go, the same way your husband chose to go.”

“I wonder what he’d say,” said Mercedes, “if he knew you were sleeping in a brothel tonight!”

Ana laughed. “I can’t imagine.”

“What’s he like, your husband?” asked Simona, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. She was young, Ana realised, not more than seventeen. She wondered what had brought her here, to this house, this way of life. She smiled at Simona.

“Well,” she said, “he makes me laugh. But at the same time, he’s a serious person. He hides it well, unless you know him. He’s very kind.” She felt a lump rising in her throat and swallowed it.

“What does he look like?”

“Tall,” said Ana, closing her eyes and picturing his face, “with black hair and dark eyes. He has a bump in his nose, he broke it playing football when he was younger, and he has a crooked smile, and a Catalan accent – he grew up in Barcelona.”

“He sounds very handsome.”

“Yes,” said Ana, smiling at Simona, “he is.”

“How did you meet him?” asked Marguerita.

“I met him in the theatre where I worked,” said Ana.

“Are you an actress?” asked Simona.

Ana laughed at her expression of awe. “No,” she said, “I worked in wardrobe, making the costumes. I met Frasco at the theatre when I was twenty three. He’d just started a residency with us.”

“Let me guess,” said Antonia, her voice hard, “it was love at first sight.”

“No,” said Ana, shaking her head, “not at all. In fact I was involved with somebody else at the time. An actor, Jacinto.”

“Why didn’t you marry him?”

Ana flushed and looked down. “He was already married, to someone else.”

Antonia looked at her, eyebrows raised. “Not as sweet as you look, then,” she said.

“It was a strange thing, you know,” Ana said, shaking her head. “I never thought I would have done something like that. But there was something about Jacinto...” She stopped, embarrassed. She’d never talked about her affair to anyone before but the women seemed unfazed.

Marguerita nodded. “I know what you mean,” she said, her voice soft and wistful. “We’ve all known men like that. I knew one, once.”

“And he was the reason you ended up here, Marguerita,” said Antonia.

Ana turned, interested, but Simona interrupted. “I want to hear the end of Ana’s story, Antonia!”

Ana shrugged. “There’s not much more to tell. I met Frasco, and it was different - I was free with him. And he was so good to me.” She paused. “He made me feel like the only woman in the world.”

Simona sighed. “That’s so romantic,” she said.

Antonia rolled her eyes. “You shouldn’t believe in romance any more, Simona,” she said. “You’ve been here for too long.”

Mercedes cast her a fierce glance. “She can believe in whatever she wants, Antonia, while she still can. I’m sure she’ll be as bitter as you sooner or later.”

“Haven’t I every right?” demanded Antonia.

Ana sat, her eyes down, feeling uncomfortable. After a moment Mercedes stood up and held out her hand to Ana.

“Come, sister,” she said, “it’s my turn to cook. You can help me prepare the meal for this evening.”

Ana followed her through a doorway at the far end of the room and found herself in a small, shabby kitchen, a strange contrast with the faded opulence of the room next door. There was a table in the corner with four mismatched chairs around it and tin plates piled up in a basin. The tomato plants on the windowsill provided the only colour in the room, the green limbs bowed down with the weight of their bright heavy fruit.

“Don’t worry about Antonia,” said Mercedes, once the door had swung shut behind them. She crossed to the window and pulled off three of the tomatoes. “She’s been here too long, and it’s starting to get to her.”

“How did she end up working here?” asked Ana, curious.

Mercedes shook her head, her long hair swinging around her waist. “It’s not my story to tell. But I’m sure she’ll tell you herself before the night is through.”

She handed Ana an onion and a knife and put a pot of water on the stove. Ana began to slice the onion into small pieces.

“And how did you come to be here?” She glanced at Mercedes, who was peeling one of the tomatoes. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is.”

“Not at all, it’s only natural to be curious,” said Mercedes. “I’d guess that you don’t know too many women like us.”

Ana shook her head.

“I come from a village along the coast,” said Mercedes. “I spent my childhood there, but it was too small for me. I dreamt of the big city.”

Ana looked at her but Mercedes was still looking down, peeling a second tomato.

“When I was sixteen,” she said, “I ran away from home and I came to this city. I tried to find work as a dancer, or a singer in a club, but it was harder than I’d thought. Then I met Luisa.”

“Who’s Luisa?”

“She’s the owner of this house. She’s having a siesta, but she’ll be down for the meal. I met her when I was at the end of my savings, hungry and homeless, knowing nobody here. I didn’t plan to stay for long.” She paused, sweeping her hair over her shoulder with the back of her hand, and sighed. “Nobody does.”

As Mercedes peeled and chopped the tomatoes, she told Ana her story. She’d started working, earning enough money to send home to her family, who were peasants. The longer she worked, the harder it became to imagine ever returning to the life she’d left.

“And so the years passed,” she finished, dropping the chopped tomatoes into the pot, “and at the end of them, I find myself still here.”

“And you’ve never wanted to leave?” asked Ana.

“I’ve thought of it, once or twice,” said Mercedes. “But where would I go? I couldn’t go back to the village. And, as I told you, the girls here...they’ve become my family now. This is my life, for better or worse.”

She shot a sharp glance at Ana from under her eyelashes.

“Don’t feel sorry for me, sister. I’m not unhappy here.”

“I don’t,” said Ana. “You seem happier than me.”

Ana added the onion to the mix, and Mercedes stirred it with a wooden spoon. She took out the bread that Ana had given her earlier that day, and sliced it up.

“Will you keep an eye on this? I’ll go and wake Luisa.”



Ana nodded, taking the spoon from her.

During the meal Ana almost forgot about the cold stone of unease that she'd had in the pit of her stomach ever since her meeting with the captain, the food and the company distracting her. Afterwards, when darkness had fallen, Luisa spoke.

"Right girls," she said, "go and get dressed in case we have callers this evening."

"Chance would be a fine thing," muttered Antonia as she pushed her chair back from the table.

Ana glanced at Mercedes, who was clearing away the dishes.

"Come with me, Ana," she said, "you will see the appalling number of cosmetics in our dressing room!"

But Luisa held up her hand, smiling. "I should like to have the opportunity to get to know our guest a little. It's not often that we have female company!"

Ana returned her smile, masking her unease. Luisa had been very welcoming to Ana but she didn't trust her. There was something in her eyes that reminded her of the captain. A hungry look. She noticed it especially when Luisa's eyes turned to her, or Simona.

Mercedes, Antonia, Marguerita and Simona all trooped out of the kitchen. She could hear their footsteps going up the stair, their conversation gradually fading away into the upper floor.

"Come, Ana," Luisa said, pushing herself to her feet, "we will go to sit in the salon."

Lifting her glass, Ana followed Luisa through. She looked at Luisa out of the corner of her eye as she went round the room, lighting lamps and candles. She was a heavy set woman. The features of her face must once have been attractive but they had coarsened with age. Her eyelids were heavy and dark with kohl, her cheeks and lips puffy and shining. She wore strings of coral beads about her throat and heavy coral rings on her fingers. Her blond hair showed an inch of black at the roots. Once she'd put on a record and the scratchy music had swelled out into the room, she settled herself into a chair. She placed a cigarette in a long, carved holder, lit it, and looked at Ana, an unsettling gaze that made Ana feel naked.

"I really appreciate your hospitality, Senora," she began. Her voice came out in a whisper and she coughed and took a gulp of her wine.

Luisa waved her hand, trailing smoke through the air. Her rings glittered in the flickering light.

"Please," she said, her voice thick with smoke, "call me Luisa."

Ana smiled nervously into the pause.

“So how long have you known my Mercedes?” asked Luisa. “She’s never mentioned a friend before.”

“Actually we only met today,” Ana said, turning her glass round in her palms. “I asked her for directions.”

Luisa’s eyes gleamed in the lamplight and she smiled, a gold tooth glinting at the side of her mouth like a threat. “So you’re a stranger in these parts? Where are you from originally, my dear?”

“Oh no,” said Ana, “I grew up in this city, I’ve lived here all my life.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve been to this area many times before, in fact I used to come here often with my husband, but it’s changed so much since the start of the war I found it hard to find my way around.”

Luisa sighed. “It’s true,” she said, “these are hard times. This used to be a busy house, day and night, and now we barely get a soul across the door.”

“Have you been here for a long time, Senora Luisa?”

“Luisa will do just fine, my dear. Yes, I used to work in this house for my padrona. I came here when I was fifteen. I was her favourite, we were both named after the same saint. She taught me everything she knew over the years, and when she died she left the business to me.”

“I see,” said Ana, taking a sip of the rough red wine.

“And it was a good business in those days, too. We were the busiest place in this neighbourhood. Instead of this contraption,” she waved a disparaging hand at the gramophone player, “we had a real band, a guitarrista and a boy that played the acordeón, filling the house with music, and the men watched with their tongues hanging out of their mouths while the girls danced in the patio with flowers in their hair.”

Ana smiled, thinking of the carnations.

“But then the war came,” Luisa sighed, “and all the men who took pleasure in taking pleasure went north, or were shot, and now all that’s left are the prudes. They don’t want to dance or drink or sing, they just want to fuck as quickly as possible, in and out and then home to their wives. More economic for me perhaps, but I miss the parties every night.”

There was a moment of silence. Luisa’s eyes were fixed on Ana but she seemed to be looking through her, into the past. It was hard to tell, the blackness of her eyes gave little away. Ana took another drink of the wine.

“So you grew up in this city, my dear? What does your father do?”

“He was a tailor. He died when I was twenty.”

“How sad. That must have been difficult for your mother?”

Ana shifted in her seat. It had been four years, almost, since she'd seen her mother. Sometimes she thought about what her father would have said to her, if he'd been alive. But then, it never would have happened if he'd been alive. And her mother didn't need her. She had Aurelia, Isabella, Manuel. They'd forced Ana into making a choice, and Frasco had made her happy. She realised Luisa was staring at her.

“It was hard for all of us. I was very close to my father. I used to work in the shop with him.”

“You don't have brothers who could have worked with him?”

“No, it's just me and my older sisters, Isabella and Aurelia. But I liked helping him in the shop. My mother and sisters were against it, but I think my father appreciated the company. And besides, I'm not the type to be happy sitting at home saying the rosary and playing cards. The shop suited me better.” She could hear that old irritation creeping into her voice and Luisa clearly heard it too.

“Well I have nothing to say against women working. If we relied on men, we'd all be shot to shit!”

Ana smiled involuntarily.

“And you're married? Did you keep working for your father after your wedding?”

“My father was dead by then, and we'd sold the shop. I was working in a theatre. That's where I met my husband.”

“An actor? You should never trust an actor, my dear. They're nothing but professional liars, and they'll never love any woman as much as they love themselves.”

Ana laughed. “No, Frasco's a playwright. I did the costumes for some of his plays.”

“A writer? Not much better, I have to be honest. I've seen a lot of them in here. They've got big ideas, but they're always as poor as churchmice, and the money they do have they spend on women and wine. Seems to me you can't be a writer unless you have cirrhosis of the liver.”

“Not Frasco. He was different.”

“Well you've obviously settled him down my dear.”

“Not enough. I would've been able to keep him at home when the war broke out if that was the case. He wouldn't have left me alone.” Ana could hear the note of bitterness in her voice and felt a little ashamed.

“So you live by yourself now?”

“We have an apartment in La Cueva, near the river.”

“Well, your man would have been taken away and shot in the night if he’d stayed here, just like all the others from these streets.”

Ana took another drink of her wine and sighed. “You’re probably right,” she said.

The layers of smoke shifted and settled in the air. Ana was exhausted from the exertions and emotions of her day, overcome by the smoke and the wine. She sank back into her seat. Luisa’s black eyes were on her, impossible to read. Then the door opened and Simona, Marguerita and Antonia walked in. To Ana’s eyes, the transformation was almost nightmarish, especially in Simona. The soft yellow curls that had previously framed her face were piled up at the top of her head, drawn back from her round, still-childish face, which was white with powder and painted with garish reds and greens. Her eyes were rimmed with black, thick lines which swept upwards at the corners. She was wearing a tight pink dress that emphasised every line and curve of her body. When she smiled at Ana it was as though a scarlet wound had opened in her face. Antonia was equally transformed but the clothes and cosmetics only reinforced the hardness that had been there in her face before. She poured herself a drink and came to sit near Ana.

“Now we wait,” she said, and Ana thought of what it must be like, sitting in that room night after night, waiting for unknown men to arrive.

Then Mercedes walked in. Despite the red dress and the black khol, the vulgarity of the other three was absent. The colour of the dress set a fire in her eyes and lips and her long hair spilled over her bare shoulders, burnished to gold and gleaming in the candlelight. Ana could see why Pablo had wanted to paint her. And yet she too was transformed, and the unfamiliarity of her surroundings and companions was all at once overwhelming. Mercedes glanced at her and spoke.

“You look tired, sister. Why don’t I show you to where you’ll sleep tonight?”

Ana nodded. Antonia laughed, a hard, mirthless sound.

“Nobody is supposed to spend an evening in a brothel asleep!”

But Mercedes held out her hand to Ana and Ana took it, grateful for the warmth of her skin that seemed to re-establish reality and draw her out of her sudden, waking nightmare. She said goodnight and followed Mercedes out of the room like a child. They climbed the narrow staircase, the red of Mercedes’ dress blooming like a flower in the shadows. On the first landing, through opened doorways, Ana caught glimpses of frayed sheets and tarnished

brass beds, paintings of naked, abundantly fleshy women, richly patterned rugs that were threadbare in the centre, moth-eaten scarves hung over lamps and faded walls painted red and gold and pink. An incongruous crucifix hung on the wall of the landing and Ana, catching sight of it, thought of how appalled her mother would be if she knew where her youngest daughter was spending the night. Mercedes led her past the open doorways and up another flight of stairs. The room she showed her into was as austere as a monk's cell, with blank walls, bare boards and no furniture except the single bed, narrow and low, with a chamberpot underneath it.

"Whose room is this?" asked Ana.

Mercedes smiled. "This is the room where we put the men who get so drunk they're good for nothing but sleeping. They have to pay in the mornings, even though they've spent the night alone! But it hasn't been used for months."

"Yes, Luisa told me how things had changed," said Ana, taking off her shawl and placing it at the end of the bed.

"Everything changes," said Mercedes, sighing, "yet at times it seems that nothing has changed since the world began."

Ana sat down on the bed.

"I'll get up in the morning, sister, and we will have a cup of coffee together before you leave."

Ana smiled at her. "I wouldn't have left without saying goodbye, you know."

Then Mercedes bent down and hugged her. Her arms were strong, her hair cinnamon-scented. The embrace surprised Ana and tears, unbidden, sprung to her eyes. She looked down when Mercedes stood up, trying to hide them, and only looked up when Mercedes spoke from the doorway.

"Sleep well, sister." She smiled and closed the door behind her.

But Ana didn't manage to sleep for a long time. She undressed and lay down on the bed but underneath the thin cover her skin was covered in goosebumps. She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around herself but the cold seemed to have penetrated into her bones, and she felt as though she'd never be warm again. She tried to recall the mugginess of the wardrobe room in the middle of summer, or the beating sun of her honeymoon in Portugal, or the sweaty heat of lovemaking, but it only made her colder. She could feel her icy fingers against the skin of her shoulders. She longed for Frasco, a physical ache that only got worse, for his skin, warm against her own, for the beating of his heart against her ear as

she slept where she had always slept, her head under his collarbone, her body nestled between his arm and his side, their legs entangled, a warm circle of love and security and sleep. But he had left.

“Others can go,” she had said as he stood in the hallway, his bag at his feet and his jacket on. “You’re a writer. What good can you do?”

“I have to go, querida mia. You know I have to go.”

They’d spent the last couple of days huddled over the wireless, trying to make out what was going on. Bulletins every half hour, one city taken, another city resisting. The military in their city was on the side of the rebels, they’d very quickly taken control of the streets. Already there had been reports of arrests, executions. A curfew had been imposed and the air was thick with fear. Frasco had met up with the others from the theatre the day before. They hadn’t gone to the theatre itself, worried it was being watched. Instead they’d met in Daniel’s apartment and had decided to meet Alejandro in Madrid and join the militias.

“But you’re a writer, not a soldier. You don’t know anything about war!”

He had cupped her face with his hand, saying nothing, smiling with infinite sadness.

She hadn’t wanted to beg but the words spilled out of her. “Please, Frasco, please, stay for me.”

“And if everybody stays for their woman, Ana? You know I have to go, you know why. Don’t make it harder for me.”

“You don’t have to go. You’re choosing to go.” She could see the sorrow on his face, but also his determination. She’d watched him listening to the bulletins, his face dark with outrage, watched him pacing the room, smoking cigarettes furiously, listened to him, saying again and again, “How can they do this? How can they do this?” She’d seen the change in him when he’d come back from the meeting, calm and focused, now that he’d decided to go. She knew that he wouldn’t change his mind and anger and pain and bewilderment gripped her insides. “You’re breaking my heart,” she said, her eyes brimming over. She couldn’t voice her fear, that she would never see him again, but he seemed to know it.

“I promise, Ana, on my father’s grave, that I’ll come back to you, no matter what. I swear it.” There was a pause. “After all, I’m leaving the script, too, and it’s only half finished – so even if I meet a madrilena, I’ll be coming back for that!”

The joke was what made her cry, and their kiss was salty with her tears. The last time, the last time, she kept thinking, but she couldn’t make herself believe it. He held her face in his hand and looked at her for a long moment, as if memorising every detail, and then kissed her again and walked out of the door.

The pain that she'd felt then had dulled a little, but was still a constant ache that she carried with her through every day. It was sharp now, as she lay alone in this unfamiliar bed in the attic of a brothel, wondering if Frasco was asleep at this moment, or if he, too, lay awake, perhaps thinking of her. She closed her eyes and imagined a cell, a mattress, and Frasco, lying on top of it with his hands folded behind his head. She hoped he wasn't hungry, or sick, or wounded; she couldn't bear to think of the body of the man that she loved, suffering, and so she returned to the thoughts that lulled her to sleep every night, the memories of falling asleep beside him, utterly content. She pretended that Frasco was in bed with her and pulled a pillow down beside her, putting her head on it as if it were his chest, curling her arm across it as if it were his stomach. She tried to remember how it felt to fall asleep filled with the anticipation of waking up beside him the next morning. It was a poor comfort, had been a poor comfort for the past two years, but memory and imagination were all she had to fill the space left by his absence.

She awoke with a start only a few hours later, damp hair stuck to her cheeks. She'd had another one of those dreams, so vivid that they didn't seem like dreams at all, but memories of another life. War dreams, men dropping in battle, soaked with each other's blood, running away from death, running towards it, mixed up with dancing in fields and singing along the street at midnight, voices she didn't know and words she didn't understand, and every face the face of the captain. She sat up, trying to slow her breathing. The square of sky above her head was still dark, though not as much, and Ana guessed that it was only an hour or so until dawn. From the floor below came the muffled but frenzied sound of a man approaching climax. The sweat cooling on her skin made her shiver, the captain's face swam before her eyes, and she realised, with a deep sense of foreboding, that only one more day remained until the day of their appointment.

Ana was woken a few hours later by Mercedes' hand on her shoulder. She struggled up through layers of sleep, rubbing her eyes, and noticed that the sky above her was blue. Mercedes left the room, saying, "The coffee's on the stove," and Ana climbed out of bed, dressing quickly and combing her hair with her fingers before twisting it back into the usual heavy knot at the base of her neck. When she walked downstairs the doors on the first landing were all shut, the house as silent as a grave. But when she came to the kitchen the coffee was bubbling on the stove, the smell of it filling the room. The doors to the patio were open,

where Mercedes was sitting in the sun, her eyes closed. Ana splashed her face with water, poured herself a cup of coffee and went out.

“I haven’t smelt coffee that good since before the war,” she said, sitting down beside her.

“Oh!” said Mercedes, starting, “I didn’t hear you come out.” She smiled and shook the hair back from her face. “One of the soldiers brought it last night.”

“But I thought the soldiers didn’t pay.”

“It was a gift, for Simona. He’s sweet on her. He’s only a boy, he hasn’t even grown a beard yet, and with a stammer too. Poor Gabito, his father’s a general, but he’s just not cut out to be a soldier. He doesn’t have it in him.”

“Well, sometimes it doesn’t show,” said Ana. “I thought the same about Frasco, but he went off to war.”

“Yes,” said Mercedes, “the difference is he’s defending something he believes in. But even though Gabito’s in Franco’s army, he’s not a fascist, and he never will be. He doesn’t have the necessary belief in his own superiority.”

“Well hopefully he never will. The country’s overrun with them already.”

“He’ll have to learn, if he wants to survive. And now, poor boy, he’s fallen in love with a prostitute. I feel sorry for him, I really do,” said Mercedes, shaking her head.

Ana drank her coffee. The smooth liquid was hot in her mouth.

“I was never very interested in politics,” said Mercedes. “None of it seemed to make much difference to my life. But I can’t help but think that the Fascists are the wrong people for power. There’s no generosity of spirit there. All they want to do is to control, and to crush anyone they can’t control.”

“I know that the Republic is worth fighting for,” said Ana. “But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“I can believe that, sister,” said Mercedes, pulling her hair around her neck and twisting it into a long dark rope.

“You’ve been very kind to me Mercedes,” Ana said.

Mercedes didn’t speak for a moment, but when she did, there was a note of sadness in her voice.

“You know, you remind me of my little sister, back in the village,” she said. “Juanita was only eleven when I left, but there is something of her in your face and your manner. She’d be around your age now, I guess.”



“I’d like it if we could be friends, Mercedes,” said Ana, putting her hand over hers, where it lay on the broken stones of the patio. A weed was growing from the crack under their hands, dull green against the dusty stones.

Mercedes turned to smile at her and said, “I’d like that too.”

Paris, January 1937

“Well, this is where I live,” said Leila. They were standing in the street outside a tall, narrow building. Michael had accompanied her home, not wishing to leave her struggling with her case and wanting, too, to spend as much time as possible with her, though he hadn’t admitted the fact to himself. There was a small café on the ground floor and the waiter wiping down tables outside nodded to Leila and said something, his eyes darting inquisitively at Michael. Leila smiled and replied in French. Michael stared at her, the sound of the foreign words coming out of her mouth making her, momentarily, a stranger to him.

Leila smiled at him uncertainly. “He said Happy New Year.”

“Oh,” said Michael. He felt inside his pocket for the address that Peter had scribbled down for him, a working man’s hotel where the rest were staying, near the station. “Well, do you know the best way to this place? Don’t want to end up wandering the streets all night.”

“Would you like to come upstairs for a cup of tea?” Leila was blushing, colour spreading through her face, eyes down on the ground.

The waiter had finished wiping down the tables and was standing in the doorway, arms folded, looking over at them.

“I don’t know. I should really...”

She looked up at him and her eyes were full of tears. “I just can’t bear the thought of you going away to a war and anything might happen to you, and I’ll never see you again.”

“You went away to London without a second thought,” said Michael. He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. A tear gathered on her eyelashes. It ran down over her cheek, leaving a shining trail, and pooled in the corner of her mouth. She caught it on the tip of her tongue.

“I’ll take your case up for you, anyway,” he said. Leila nodded, her head still bowed. He followed her into the lobby and up the narrow stair, the suitcase bumping awkwardly against the walls at every turn. The further up they went, the smaller the landings were and the stronger the smell. It wasn’t unpleasant but it was a distinctly foreign smell, serving to remind Michael how far he was from home. Only when they’d arrived in Paris had he really felt like he’d left. The light was different, the streets had a different look. He’d noticed the women more than anything, not in any seedy way but just amazed how unlike they were to the women at home. In Glasgow most of the women he passed in the street looked worn down, with a general air of shabbiness, but the women here were different, although he couldn’t say why. Even the older ones and the heavy ones had something, the way they

walked, perhaps. When he'd looked into their faces there had been a nakedness there and he'd found himself blushing, acutely aware of Leila on his arm, the weight of her case in his hand.

There was something of that look in her face now, as she turned the key in the lock and walked inside, leaving the door open for him to follow. She turned up the gaslight and he put the case down by the door. The apartment was very small, even smaller than his house. The kitchen had a stove in the corner, with a rickety looking table across from it and an enormous wardrobe which had seen better days. There were two sliding doors, left open, which gave on to the bedroom. Leila had taken off her coat and folded it over the back of a chair. She was standing next to the door with her arms above her head, unpinning her hat, placing it on the stand. The warm glow thrown out by the gaslight caught the line of her throat, the wave of her hair, cream and copper against the faded colours of the room. Michael sat down on one of the chairs.

"Would you like tea?" Leila asked. "Or gin? I have some gin somewhere, perhaps."

Michael shrugged. "I don't mind. Whatever you'd prefer."

"Let's have some gin." She poured the drinks and passed one to Michael. "Cheers," she said, clinking their glasses together.

They both took a gulp and screwed up their faces.

Leila laughed. "It's horrible, isn't it? I don't know why I buy it."

"Aye," he said, pulling a face.

There was a moment of silence. Leila looked down into her drink, turning the glass round in her hand, and Michael just looked at her. They'd spent so much time together in the past but always in public, in the picturehouse, at the dancing, in the park, out walking. This was the first time they'd ever been alone in a room together. He watched as she ran her fingers back and forth along the edge of the table, searching out chips and scratches in the wood.

Michael put out his hand and stroked her face, very gently, down the line of her jaw, his hand coming to rest under her chin, his thumb in the hollow beneath her bottom lip. Her skin was warm and he felt a tightening in his stomach. Her eyes were fixed on his, and then he kissed her, his arms sliding round her shoulders, their faces pressed together, the sharp taste of the gin mingling in their mouths. Michael felt as if he was falling into the kiss, her hands on his face pulling him deeper and deeper. He couldn't believe it was happening, it had

been so long since he'd kissed her and yet it was so familiar. At that moment she was everything, the world reduced to the taste of her mouth and the bright colour of her hair through his half closed eyes, and the sound of their breathing, the small groans in the back of her throat. He pulled her to the bed and they fell together, legs entwining, arms wrapped around each other, kissing with hunger and desperation, and all he could think as he kissed her was, this is the last time, the last time, the last.

The buttons on her cream blouse were very small, hooked through tiny loops of ribbon, and it seemed to take him forever to unfasten them. His hands were shaking with hurry but he forced himself to take his time, planting a kiss on each inch of pale skin that was revealed with the undoing of another button. Undressed, her skin was translucent in parts, networks of veins visible at her wrists, her hips, her chest, branching out bluey under the skin like coral. Her defter fingers unbuttoned his shirt much more quickly, sliding it back over his shoulders. He lay on top of her and the contact of their bare skin was warm and shocking. They were kissing greedily, rubbing their bodies together like cats. His mind was reeling, he still couldn't believe it, the sight, smell, feel of her, hair, skin, arms, legs, lips, throat, eyes with flecks of green and brown among the grey, the colour of seawashed stone, a scent of seaweed and salt as he pulled her closer, crushing her against him, skin against skin, the sound of their breathing and all he could think was, this is the last time, the last time, the last.

He was too conscious of her body beneath his to relax his weight and when the pressure caused his forearms to start aching, he kissed the corner of her mouth and moved on to his back. She put her head on his chest, in the hollow beneath his collarbone and he wrapped his arms around her. I love you, he thought, I have always loved you. He could taste the words in his mouth, but knew he wouldn't say them.

"Michael?" Her voice was low.

"Aye?"

"Do you sometimes imagine what would have been if I'd stayed, or you'd come with me?"

There was nothing accusatory in her tone, just a drifting wistfulness.

"What do you mean?"

She yawned, and he could feel the movement of her jaw against his chest, warm breath whispering over his skin.

“Do you think that it’s possible that there was a different life for us, different selves, somewhere? Another version of you, another of me, and that you came with me to London, and then here, or maybe I stayed in Glasgow, but mainly that we’ve never been parted, in this other life, that we’ve lived our lives together, falling asleep like this every night. We don’t spend every minute together, sometimes we’re away from each other, but we always meet again with a secret feeling of relief because for a moment we’d imagined another life, this life, where instead of being together we’re hopelessly apart.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Yes. I think you’re right. That’s what happened.”

“We’ll never be closer to them, to those other selves, than we are tonight, will we?”

The words were already blurred with sleep and he didn’t reply. Before long her breathing deepened and slowed but Michael lay awake, saving the feeling of her body against his, the smell of her hair, the sound of her breath, saving it against whatever was ahead of him, mourning the moment even while living it, trying to lock the memory of her into his body so that it would console him in the future. He wanted to stay awake all night, he didn’t want to miss a minute, the time was so short. But he was tired from two days of travelling and before an hour had passed he too was asleep.

When he opened his eyes in the morning he couldn’t understand, for a confused minute, where he was. The cracks in the ceiling were unfamiliar, there was a weight on his shoulder and across his legs, and he remembered with a start where he was and who he was with. Then he realised where he was supposed to be.

“It’s only eight, the bells have just gone,” she said. “Was that what woke you?”

The room was still dim and he turned on to his side to face her, so that their noses were almost touching. Her face was solemn.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yes. Did you?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll need to get up,” Michael said. “The train’s leaving at nine.”

“I know,” she said.

“I miss you, you know,” he said lightly. “I’ve missed you since you left.”

“I’ll go with you to the station, if you like,” she said.

“I’d rather remember you here,” he said, “but you will have to give me directions.”

She nodded, her eyes moving up and across his face. He kissed her, a long, lingering kiss, before he climbed out of the bed. The wooden floor was cold to his feet and he dressed

quickly. Leila wrapped a robe round herself and went through to the kitchen. He could hear her filling the kettle, putting it on the stove, the soft sound of her bare feet on the floorboards. When he went through to the kitchen she was standing on one leg, one foot tucked behind her knee, her arms stretched above her head, the hem of her robe hitching up to reveal her fine-drawn dancer's legs. He sat down at the table and Leila came to sit opposite him, tugging her fingers through the tangles of her hair.

"So how do I get to the station from here?" Michael asked. "I know we walked from there last night, but it was dark, I don't know if I'd remember it."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

Michael shook his head. "I'm sure."

"Well I'll draw you a map," said Leila, crossing the room and picking up her handbag, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen. She sketched out a rough map, scribbling the foreign street names in her familiar hand as the kettle began to whistle. "Would you like a cup of tea? I've no milk, I'm afraid. Or we could get a coffee from downstairs?"

"Tea's fine," said Michael.

She placed the cup in front of him and sat down again. They drank their tea without speaking, holding hands. When he stood up and pulled on his jacket, she stood too, her eyes bright and anguished.

"Michael."

He opened the door and she came forward, her hand outstretched for his. He took hold of her hand and she stretched up to kiss him, the last time, the last, and then he had to go, her fingers slipping out of his one by one, and he hurried down the narrow staircase because if he didn't leave fast he knew he wouldn't leave at all.

## The Portrait

Everything seemed brighter when she left the brothel. The empty, shuttered streets seemed not dead but asleep, as if under a spell. Ana walked quickly along to the florists. When Pablo opened the door she was shocked out of her good mood, however. He seemed to have aged ten years overnight, his face grey and lined in the unforgiving light of the morning. He moved away across the room with that curious swivelling motion as she noticed the basket sitting where she had left it the previous day, the food inside untouched. She pointed at it.

“You haven’t eaten anything?” she asked.

He didn’t reply. She turned to look at him. He was sitting with his back to her in front of an easel. By his side, on a table, was a mirror, and she could see the corner of the picture over his shoulder. She walked across the room and stood behind him to look at the picture. Drawn in charcoal, it was the face of the man sitting in front of her and yet there was more on the page than she’d seen. Through some mysterious alchemy of charcoal, paper and artistry, he’d captured his past, his future, his dreams and fears, the things he was proud of and the things that made him ashamed. As Ana looked at it she was suddenly embarrassed by what she had asked him to do. She understood his reticence the day before and understood too why Mercedes had described her own portrait as painful to look at. Her cheeks coloured as she looked at the drawing, remembering her angry words.

“It is... You are very, very talented,” she said, struggling for the right words.

Pablo was unsmiling. “Thank you.”

There was a loud knock on the door and they both looked at one another. Ana’s heart started pounding and she could tell that Pablo was afraid as well, could see it in his face. He limped towards the door. Ana shook her head frantically.

“They’ll only break it down,” he said quietly.

But when he opened the door there was nobody there. Ana crossed the room and, looking over his shoulder, saw the empty landing.

“Strange,” she said.

He stepped out on to the landing and leant into the stairwell. “Hola?”

But there was no answer, not even the sound of footsteps. A knock on the door and nobody there was an omen of death, a relative who was already dead, coming back for you. Ana’s mother was full of these old superstitions and Ana had always laughed at her, but now the hairs rose on her arms as she wondered who the knock had been for, Pablo or her.

“Maybe someone looking for Belia,” he said, closing the door behind him again. “Or maybe just the wind.”

“Maybe,” she said, but she couldn’t shake the feeling.

He limped back across the room, and sat down on a stool by the window.

“Thank you again for the portrait, Pablo.”

“I wasn’t able to fight,” he said, looking out of the window. “No. That’s not true. I thought that I wouldn’t be able to fight.”

“You are an artist, not a soldier,” Ana said.

“Franco’s army are winning,” he said, “and they don’t want to build a country for artists. I could have gone to Madrid.”

“Too many men went north,” Ana said, “and none have returned.”

“And it makes me ashamed,” he said. “I should have gone north.”

Ana didn’t know what to say. She wanted to put her arms around him, to comfort him, but instead she put her hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t realise what I was asking.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “I’ve been able to do something which might help your husband to get out of prison.”

“Thank you.” She squeezed his shoulder, trying to convey all her gratitude with that touch. “Thank you.”

Pablo didn’t reply. He rolled the picture up tightly and handed it to her.

“Be careful, Ana,” he said, opening the door. “Be careful of this capitán. He may not want a piece of my soul, but of yours.”

Ana shook her head and held up the picture. “No,” she said, “he wanted eyes that have seen. I still don’t know why, or what he means, but you have eyes that see. It shows in the portrait.”

Pablo looked at her. “Just be careful.”

Once she was out on the street again Ana put his warning to the back of her mind. She looked at the blue of the sky and decided to walk home the long way, by the river. Perhaps it was the time she’d spent with Mercedes the night before, or the sunshine, or the relief of having something to give to the captain, but Ana felt happier than she’d felt in a long time. She walked through the streets to the river. It was sunken below the level of the city and she had to walk down a long flight of steps to get to the walkway. It had been paved in such a way that there were spaces left for trees to grow, and the trees had been planted so long ago, and



had grown so tall, that their roots were pushing up against the stones, and weeds and flowers grew through the cracks. The sun filtered through the branches, dappling the paving stones, and Ana glanced upwards. The leaves were beginning to change, the edges of them curling from green to tarnished gold, marking the turning of the year. The river moved slowly under the sun, a wide, shining band. She walked alongside the water, its soursweet scent filling her nostrils, the sun's warmth on the back of her neck. She passed the cathedral, high up above the river walls, on the other side of the water, and the sight of the spires and statues of saints that lined the roof, the high dome glinting in the light, made her think of her mother. The familiar mixture of anger and guilt flickered inside her again but she pushed it away.

When she arrived home she was tired, and pushed open the heavy door to her building with effort. On the second landing she met Elisa, who was washing the stairs.

"Buenos días, Elisa," she said, stopping and leaning against the wall.

Elisa straightened up with a groan and Ana fancied she could hear her bones creaking.

"Hola nina," she said, her eyes glinting in the dim light from a nest of wrinkled skin, a smile splitting off into a thousand new lines. "You look tired. Have you been out walking again? And I didn't hear you come home yesterday. Where did you sleep last night?"

"I slept at a friend's house," Ana said, "and I walked home."

Elisa raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Instead she pinched Ana's hip and tutted disapprovingly.

"Skin and bone left alone, that's what you are," she said. "You shouldn't be walking anywhere. You need to eat more. You're coming down for dinner tonight?"

Ana and Elisa ate together most nights. Elisa had been Ana's saviour after Frasco left, keeping her company when the theatre shut, letting her talk her worries through when she was sick with them, filling endless hours with harmless gossip and stories of her youth. Ana had come to care for Elisa as she would have for her mother, had things been different.

"I can't come for dinner tonight, Elisa" Ana said, "but I'll come for dinner tomorrow, I promise."

"Well come in for a cup of tea just now then and tell me about your night. I've more or less finished the stairs."

"Here, let me help you," said Ana.

Together they knelt down on the stairs. Elisa handed Ana a cloth, soaked in warm water, and they slid their cloths in matching circles, side by side, wide swathes of moisture cutting through the dust. The years between them could be seen in their hands. Ana's were

smooth, lightly tanned, her wedding ring a bright band that contrasted with her skin. Elisa could no longer fit her wedding ring over her swollen knuckles. The veins on the back of her hands stood out like the roots of trees and the skin was mottled with brown. When she put her hand in Ana's to get up, her palms and fingers were smooth, the skin of them polished by work and care, more than eighty years of washing clothes and dishes, floors and children's faces.

They went inside. Elisa filled the kettle and put it on the stove. When she handed Ana the cup of tea, she wrapped her hands round it.

"So this friend," Elisa said, once she'd settled herself in her chair next to the stove, "is it a man?"

"No! Of course not," Ana said, shocked. "She's a woman, Mercedes Escalona. She lives near the port."

"Well I'm glad to hear it," Elisa said. "Frasco's a good boy. And he'll come back to you, just like Federico. Though Teresa's not been herself. I don't like the sound of this captain. What kind of man did he seem to you?"

Ana shrugged.

"I just want you to be careful," said Elisa.

Ana didn't reply and Elisa changed the subject.

"I remember the first time I saw your man, I was carrying my groceries up the stairs and he offered to help me, and I thought, what a lovely young man!"

Ana smiled at the memory. The day they had moved in, Frasco running up and down the three flights of stairs carrying boxes and suitcases, and Elisa arriving home in the middle of it all, demanding that he carry her groceries up the stairs. Frasco had made a face to Ana as he followed Elisa up the steps, saying, "Listen, Senora, you must have the strength of ten men to carry these things all the way from the market yourself!" And then he appeared out of the gloom back into the brightness of the street, mopping his brow exaggeratedly. He caught Ana round the waist, kissed the side of her neck, and said into her ear, "You know, la vieja thinks I have a very pretty wife, and I told her she was wrong." Ana raised her eyebrows in mock indignation, and he said, "I told her I had married the most beautiful girl in all of Spain!" He swung her round in a wide, laughing circle and lifted her up for a kiss, warm and deep and inappropriate considering they were out in the street, but neither of them cared.

"And so tall and handsome too, with that nice hair and smile," Elisa continued. Ana didn't reply. A wave of anticipation rose inside her and she glanced at the rolled up portrait for the captain, propped in the corner next to the door.

“You were lovely in those days too, nina, you made a very handsome couple. But you’ve lost too much weight since the start of the war, skin and bone, like I said.”

“Well it can’t go on forever. I’m sure I’ll get nice and fat when it’s all over and things are back to normal.”

“And when Frasco’s back we’ll maybe have a new bebé in the building, eh nina?”

Ana smiled inwardly.

“I’m serious, Ana. You’re not such a young woman any more. What are you, twenty six, twenty seven?”

“Twenty seven.”

“When I was your age I had six already. You wait much longer, it becomes more difficult.”

“We’ll see, Elisa. We’ll see.”

Ana finished her tea and stood up to go.

“Take care, nina.”

“Thanks for the tea.”

Ana climbed the remaining stairs to her apartment. She walked across the bedroom and opened the shutters, still holding Pablo’s self portrait in her hand. Across the river she could see the spires of the cathedral, the flags fluttering on the buildings requisitioned by the army, and, away to the right, the blue-purple of the mountains, shimmering in the midday heat, over which so many men had escaped at the start of the war, to go and fight in the north. She turned away from the window to the bed, sitting down to remove her boots and then lying down, closing her eyes. She would try to sleep for as long as she could. In that way the hours would pass more quickly until the morning.

## The Pyrenees, February 1937

The rumbling of the trucks' engines died away into the distance and the immense silence of the mountains settled down over the group. Michael turned his collar up against the wind and looked up. The thin white beams of the searchlights swept across slopes thick with pine trees and above that, the bare expanses of black, jutting rocks were crowned with scatterings of snow. The guide, a small thin man with a sullen expression, motioned for the group to gather round and began speaking quietly while Archie, a London man, translated for the English speakers in a low voice.

"No speaking except in whispers, the sound carries. No smoking once we're on the move, the guards might see the light. If you get caught in a searchlight, stay completely still, movement is easier for them to see. Follow the man in front as closely as you can. If you fall back or get into difficulty, whistle twice. It's a clear night which makes it easier for us to follow each other, but it means it's also easier for the guards to see us."

The rest of the group passed along the message in their various languages. About half of them were Communists but the rest were a mixture of socialists, liberals, trade unionists, working class men like him from every corner of Europe. Michael lacked Johnny's instant ease with strangers but he'd made friends in a quiet way with Charlie. He was a miner from Sheffield, only just turned eighteen, and Johnny had been their passport to the rest of the group. They were all going to fight in the same war, after all, on the same side, and despite the language barriers they'd all been in high spirits, miming jokes, singing songs. Now, though, the mood was tense, the men's faces set with determination. Charlie was next to him, biting his lip, his shoulders hunched against the cold. Michael caught Johnny's eye. Johnny winked and stretched his arms out above his head.

"Ready for a wander, Mickey? I've always wanted to wander in the Pyrenees--"

"Shhhh! Didn't you hear what Archie said? Do you want us all to get caught?" Arthur was an older man from Newcastle who'd joined them the day before. Johnny rolled his eyes and grinned, and Michael moved closer to him. A patter merchant like Johnny would be able to talk himself out of any situation, even one involving the breaking of the laws of the League of Nations.

They started moving off up the slope, the only sound the crunch of boots on the ground. Michael was near the back of the group, behind Johnny, in front of Charlie, and

ahead of him he could see a long line of men snaking up towards the darkness of the pines. He was nervous but glad to be on the way. Once they reached the cover of the trees they seemed less exposed, and they were more protected from the wind, but it was darker under the branches. Michael could only see Johnny in front of him, breathing heavily as he hauled his way up. Michael tried to angle his body against the incline of the ground but as the slope grew steadily steeper he was forced to haul himself up as Johnny was doing, the pine needles pricking his palms as he grasped at tree roots. Up ahead he heard a thump and a muttered curse, then another thump and a scrabbling noise and the sound of muffled laughter from Johnny.

“What’s going on?” he whispered.

“Some eejit’s fallen over a tree root or something, and they’re all going down like a row of dominoes.”

“Shhh!” Arthur again. He seemed to have taken upon himself the role of leader of their little section of the line.

“Ah shush yourself you old woman,” whispered Johnny. “This isn’t a fucking library.”

“You’ll get us caught if you don’t keep your bloody mouth shut!” Arthur’s voice was loud with indignation, and a chorus of hushing noises came from the men in front and behind. Michael caught Charlie’s eye and looked down, hiding a smile. They started moving again. The guide must have speeded up, for they were going almost at a running pace. Behind the sounds of footsteps and heavy breathing, Michael was very aware of the stillness. It stretched out through the trees, something weighty and timeless, making them seem a little bubble of noise and movement amidst a vast silence. It was disconcerting, used as he was to the constant noise and bustle of Cathcart Road, trams and carts going by, the sound of children playing, the women hanging out of windows calling to their friends in the street, the mutterings of the men on the dole, hanging round on street corners. He shook his head. He still couldn’t believe he was here, climbing through the foothills of the Pyrenees. If it wasn’t for the ache in his calves he’d think he was dreaming.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t notice that they’d stopped, and almost fell over Johnny who was crouching down, drinking from a small stream.

“Christ Almighty, will you watch where you’re going? I’ve already had my bath this month.”

“Sorry,” said Michael, crouching down next to him to take a drink. The water was so cold it hurt his teeth, but his throat was dry and he drank deeply before sitting back against a tree and stretching out his aching legs. A whisper moved down the line and Eddie crawled over to them.

“Alright lads?”

“Aye, not too bad,” said Johnny. “What’s the craic?”

“We’re taking a five minute break. We’re almost out of the trees and about ten minutes up the hill there’s a track which leads to another track which leads to a pass, but the next bit of hillside is getting swept with the searchlights so we’ll be moving over it as fast as we can to the bushes at the top of the ridge.” He stopped for a breath. “Peter says remember to freeze if you get caught in the light, it’s the movement they see.”

“Any chance of a smoke do you think?”

Eddie nodded back down the line. “There’s a few of them smoking so you should be all right, just keep it cupped in your hand and close to the ground.”

“Grand.”

Eddie started crawling off further down the hill to pass on the message, but turned back as Johnny and Michael got out their cigarettes. “Try not to set the wood on fire, eh boys?”

“Aye, no bother,” said Johnny. The two of them lay down on their stomachs, lighting their cigarettes quickly from the match flaring in Johnny’s cupped hand, throwing a brief flicker of light across his face.

“Have either of you seen Eddie? I went for a piss and he disappeared,” said a voice to their left. Bill was crouched just behind them, retying the laces on his boots. “I’ve got blisters already, this should be a fucking laugh.”

“He’s just down from us, passing the message on,” said Michael, following the direction of Bill’s gaze. There was a pause. “What do you think will happen if we get caught by the Non Intervention guards?”

“We won’t get caught, so it won’t be a problem,” said Johnny, flicking the ash from his cigarette into the stream.

“I’m still drinking from that, thanks very much!” said a laughing voice to Michael’s right.

“Shite, sorry Charlie, I never saw you,” said Johnny. “Here, have one yourself.”

“No, I’m all right thanks. I’ll have a smoke when we get to Spain.” He sat back and stretched his arms out behind him.

“How much longer’ll that be, do you think?” asked Michael.

“Arthur says we’re halfway up the mountain.”

“Arthur says,” said Johnny dismissively, stubbing his cigarette out on a rock and flicking the butt away. Michael finished his cigarette and sat up, rubbing his arms and legs. Now that they’d been sitting for five minutes, he was getting cold again. He could feel a blister forming on his heel. The boots were too big for him and even though he’d stuffed the toes, the leather was still shaped to his da’s feet. He moved into a crouch, placing his two hands palm down on the ground, and looked around. The others were little more than dark forms against the trees. Michael stretched his fingers out and curled them back in, gathering a loose handful of pine needles and soil, rubbing the cold earth between his palms.

“Johnny...” he said, hesitant.

“Aye?”

But at that moment there was movement, shapes stirring in the darkness; it was time to go. He didn’t know how to explain his thoughts anyway, so he shook his head and said, “Nothing,” as they started to creep upwards again. Michael was breathing heavily from the exercise, but waiting to scramble across that searchlit stretch, he could feel his heart starting to beat even faster, his palms damp with sweat and his mouth dry.

The guide was speaking again and Archie translated. “We go across in groups of five, as fast as we can. Once you get to the bushes get in underneath them and stay there for further instructions.”

Michael was in the second group, him, Johnny and Charlie, and Bill and Eddie. He watched as the first five scrambled across the hillside, dodging the swinging searchlights and diving under the bushes like hunted rabbits. Johnny clapped him on the shoulder and Charlie shifted nervously next to him. Now it was their turn there seemed to be more lights on the ground than before.

“Wait for it,” Johnny whispered, “wait for it...” Eddie and Bill looked at him, their faces as tense as Michael felt. Two or three of the beams of light swung away at the same time and Johnny whispered, “Now.”

The five of them began running, bent low to the ground. Michael kept his eyes on the earth under his feet, knowing that if he saw a searchlight coming towards him he’d panic. The ground was steep and he clawed at the rocks with his hands, trying to gain a little speed. Johnny looked back once or twice, checking on them, but Michael didn’t want to look behind or ahead, knowing he’d see only the shelter of the trees or how far they still had to go and feel even more exposed than he already did. His breath tore at his chest, his throat burned and

the muscles at the backs of his legs screamed in protest. Charlie, running next to him, tripped over a rock and fell flat out, but Michael grabbed his arm and dragged him back up, keeping him moving. After what felt like an age they reached the bushes, crawling upwards under the scratchy branches until they got to the first group. Johnny flopped on to his back and Michael lay down on his front.

“Good work chaps,” whispered Archie. As the rest of the group arrived in fives, the hammering of Michael’s heart slowed, and when they were all there, they started again, bent double, running as fast as they could up the hillside. There were fewer searchlights on this part but Michael was still sweating, cold drops standing out on his forehead, running down into his eyes and making them sting. Eventually they reached a small knoll where they could rest in the shadow. Peter appeared out of the darkness.

“Right, we’re past the most dangerous part, the guide says. Now it’s just a trek up through the pass and we’re in Spain, no sweat.”

“No sweat, going over the top of the Pyrenees? That’ll be right,” said Johnny. “It’s not every day I go mountaineering you know.”

Peter grinned. “Well, you know what I mean. We start again in five.”

“Are we all right to smoke?” Michael asked.

“Better leave it the now. You’ll be in Spain in a few hours, you can smoke all you want there.”

“Aye, no worries.”

Peter continued off down the line and Michael stood up, stretching his arms out above his head.

“My back’s killing me,” he said.

“I know how you feel,” said Johnny.

Charlie shook his head. “I’m all right,” he said, “but the pair of you would never last down the mines,” he said. “It’s an hour of travelling at least to get to the face, and you go the whole way at a crouch.”

“I feel like one of those old women you see going along Gorbals Street, all hunched over, wrapped up in a shawl.”

“I could do with a shawl right now,” said Charlie. “It’s bloody freezing up here.”

“And it’d be a great disguise if you got caught by the guards.”

“It would that. Could say I was just on my way to the butchers.”

Michael grinned and shook his head and then it was time to move again, up and onwards through the darkness.



They climbed for hours and hours without pause. Now that they were past the danger, Michael tried to look around him, but it was still so dark that nothing much could be seen. It was a strange feeling, sure only of the ground below his feet and Johnny in front of him, with no conception of what the landscape he was in could possibly look like. From time to time he looked up to see if the sky was beginning to lighten but he could see no changes, and eventually he gave up. Nobody spoke, saving their breath, raising their shoulders against the icy wind that whistled round them, the air so cold it hurt the throat to breathe in. After a while the monotony of the climb, broken only by irregularities in the ground, made it seem as though they'd been climbing forever. Michael tried to remember his house, the river, the faces of the twins, the sound of Manus' snoring, the feel of Leila's hair, but it all seemed a distant part of a past life, and his present life consisted only of this; climbing, endlessly, his legs aching, his feet burning, tormented by the wind and the cold, moving through darkness with Johnny's back before him the only thing he'd ever seen, or ever would.

Eventually they stopped for a break. Michael dropped on to his back, exhausted, and Eddie and Bill sat down beside him. Charlie came over and tugged at his arm, pointing to the east. Michael sat up.

"Look at that," said Charlie.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the sea and Michael realised that the darkness had turned into the cold light of dawn and he could see. The mountains, stretching out on either side of them, and the sky, how much sky there was, the colours of it, palest blue and pink, reflected in the water of the Mediterranean. "We're a long way from Glasgow now, eh?" said Johnny, standing next to him, his tone difficult to judge. Charlie's expression was one of pure wonder. "I've never seen anything like that," he said, waving his arm towards the view. "Never. I wish-

"You wish what?" said Michael.

"I just wish they could see it, everyone back home, I mean."

The thought struck Michael that this view would be the first of many experiences impossible to describe to his brothers, or the girls, or his mam and da. He'd never be able to paint the picture for them, never be able to explain what this moment was like, the sun on the mountains and the shining sea, the light on his face after the night's climb through darkness. He looked around, wondering if the same thought had occurred to anyone else. They all looked tired but there was an atmosphere of renewed determination; the rising sun had given

them a second wind. After another hour of trekking they reached the Spanish border. It was just over the crest of the mountain and they all stepped out on to a green hillside, dotted with rocks, bathed in the golden light of the sun. They stood there looking down the hill. There was a long, low building whose whitewashed walls gleamed in the morning light and as Michael looked, a small figure came out of the door, dressed in baggy green trousers and a khaki shirt. He waved, and as if at a signal, they set off down the hillside, all tiredness forgotten.

They reached the door and went in. The smell of coffee permeated the room, and there were loaves of bread in baskets at intervals along long tables. Eddie and Bill waved Michael, Johnny and Charlie over, shuffling along to make space for them on one of the benches, and the coffee was handed out in mugs. He could feel the heat of it trickling down inside him. For a couple of minutes the room was quiet, the only sounds chewing and slurping. Michael looked down the table at the group, a mix of men from all over the place, and as he looked one of the Germans, who'd finished his coffee, began tapping his hand on the table and singing in German, under his breath. The two other Germans joined in, and their voices grew louder and louder. Then the Italians started, arms round each others' shoulders, singing a different song, one in Italian, the two melodies clashing but the rhythm complementary. The French began singing too, the words of the songs indistinguishable in the cacophony, not that he would have understood them in any case. He sat and listened, looking around. Bill and Eddie were both slapping their hands on the table in time to one of the songs, though which one, he couldn't tell. Charlie's face was split in a grin. But Johnny was staring off into the middle distance.

And then, before Michael could ask him what was on his mind, somebody, inevitably, started up the Internationale, and they all joined in, each singing the words in his own language but all to the same tune. The sound of their voices rose and filled the long room. They banged their mugs on the table and stamped their feet in time to the music. Michael joined in, quietly at first, but Charlie was singing out at his side and slowly his voice grew louder. He looked up and saw that the Spanish soldier was singing too, and imagined the sound of their song floating out of the building and across the mountain, radiant in the morning light. The sound grew louder and louder, until it seemed as though it must be echoing across the Pyrenees, everybody singing wholeheartedly now, Johnny's arm across his shoulder and his arm across Charlie's shoulder, clapping each other on the back, laughing.

The music swelled and seemed to fill his chest, and any doubts or fears he might have had vanished in that chorus.

## The Second Meeting

It was another cloudless day as Ana set off for the military headquarters. She crossed the river at the Puente Cueva, a narrow footbridge that curved elegantly over the water, and followed the shadowed street through the tall buildings of the city centre, their tops lit by the brilliance of the morning sun. When she passed a column of soldiers in the dark colours of the Nationalists she didn't lower her eyes as usual, but scanned their faces. She remembered Mercedes' story and wondered if the shy, stammering Gabito was among them.

When she arrived at the building the secretary showed her to the same wooden bench as before. She sat down and turned the portrait round in her hands. She hoped it would be enough. After a short while the door opened and a woman passed out of the office. Ana looked at her but she didn't look back. Her eyes were flat and glassy and she was twisting her hands together. The captain appeared and Ana stood up and followed him through the doorway.

"Senora Valladares, please have a seat."

She sat, as he did, not taking her eyes off him for one minute.

"So, Senora, do you have something for me?"

When Ana spoke her voice was a whisper. "Sí, mi Capitán. Eyes that have truly seen."

She passed him Pablo's self portrait. He unfurled it and considered it for a moment, lips pursed, heavy eyebrows raised.

"Not bad, as these things go," he said, his eyes moving to her. She could see again that gleam, that curious hunger.

"But, Senora, a piece of paper with some lines drawn on it, this is not what I asked for."

"But it is a self portrait, drawn by an artist, a man who has eyes that truly see...It was the only thing I could think to bring."

The captain stood and walked round the side of the desk. He leant on the edge of the desk and bent down so their faces were inches apart. Ana's heart was beating in her ears.

"I didn't ask for a piece of paper at our last meeting. I asked for eyes that have truly seen."

She couldn't seem to look away.

"Do you remember what I said to you at our last meeting, Ana?"

She nodded.

“That if you failed to bring me what I asked for I would take it from you?”

She tried to speak but she had no voice.

“That I would take nothing from you that I wouldn’t replace?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You do want your husband back, don’t you, Senora?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

And then the walls of the room were sliding and moving, the chair seeming to give way beneath her and she was paralysed, trapped in the captain’s inexorable gaze as the blackness of his eyes spread and enveloped her.

Ana walked home slowly, still a little unsteady on her feet. It was the hour of the siesta, and the streets were practically deserted. As she walked, the captain’s words ran over and over in her head. Hands that had truly touched...She’d woken on a couch in a small room that opened on to the captain’s office. There was a narrow window behind her that looked out on to a courtyard. She’d raised herself up on her elbows and looked through the glass, and the colours of the trees against the stone were flat, lifeless somehow. When she’d stumbled through the door, the captain had been sitting behind his desk. She had been planning to demand answers from him, but as before, her anger and self-assurance seemed to evaporate in his presence and she suddenly knew that she would do whatever he asked of her, whatever he wanted. And so, instead of asking what he had done to her, and why, she sank into the chair before the desk.

“Shall I tell you your next task, Ana?”

She’d nodded.

“You have seven days to find me hands that have truly touched.”

Ana’s hands began to shake. She made them into fists and kept them low, by her sides so he wouldn’t see.

“But where...What do you mean? What can I bring you that will satisfy you?”

The captain didn’t reply. Ana felt tears rising, burning behind her eyes, but they didn’t fall.

“I can’t cry,” she said. The captain remained silent, smiling. Her voice was loud in the silence of the office. “Tell me what you have done to me!”

The captain raised his eyebrows but his voice, when he replied, was soft.

“I told you, Ana, that I wouldn’t take anything from you that I couldn’t replace. I am a man of my word.”

He'd smiled, and Ana stood and rushed out of the office, downstairs, on to the street. She looked around her, trying to understand what had changed. She looked at the blue of the sky, so beautiful to her eyes that morning, and she felt nothing.

Two days later Ana was sitting on the balcony, staring at the grey city below. The wind raised goosebumps on her bare arms but she didn't move to fetch her shawl. It was a similar October evening two years ago when she'd first realised the kind of war that was being fought. She still hadn't accustomed herself to not working and spent the days moving from room to room, kitchen to bedroom, downstairs to Elisa, back upstairs. She'd wandered out to the balcony and then she'd seen them. A long column moving along the street, movement where there usually was no movement. She hadn't understood at first, only afterwards had she heard of the soldiers going from building to building, from door to door, dragging the men out into the main plaza, herding them together like sheep. But she'd seen the column, old men, young men, faces full of bewilderment and fear, being marched along the road at gunpoint by soldiers in the dark uniform of the rebels.

They were the only people in the street but when Ana looked at the other buildings she realised she wasn't the only one watching. There were dark shapes at the back of every balcony, shadows at every window. The women of the area were watching their men being marched away. The footsteps of the soldiers and their prisoners were the only sound, but then a woman ran along the street. She grabbed at a soldier's arm. The sound of her sobs could be heard even from the balcony. "Mi hijo, mi hijo!" A young boy had turned at the sound of her voice. Ana had narrowed her eyes to see better. He couldn't be more than fourteen. The soldier was shrugging her off, pushing her away, but she clung to his arm with desperation. "Mi hijo, mi hijo!" And then another soldier had turned and hit her on the head with the butt of his rifle. It happened so suddenly that Ana wasn't sure if she'd really seen it, but the woman was lying, prone on the cobblestones. The boy lunged forward, there was a shot, and then he too was lying in the road, a pool of blood spreading slowly around his head like a dark halo. Ana drew back, suddenly afraid of being seen, but she couldn't stop looking. And then a voice, from one of the countless windows, from one of the watching women.

"Asesinos!"

The voice cut through the silence, and the soldiers swung their weapons up in the direction it came from. Another voice rang out, from another window.

"Murderers!"

They moved uncertainly, not knowing where the calls were coming from.

“Murderers!”

“Murderers!”

The voices came one after another, faster and faster, as clear and sharp as the sound of a gun. The soldiers stood, uncertain, until one who looked to be in charge barked out an order and the column began moving again, the voices of the watching women echoing after it until it disappeared.

It wasn't reported in any of the newspapers or on the radio, but later that night the wind had come from the centre, where the stadium was, and it was thick with the smell of blood.

Ana put the memory out of her head, and instead tried to think of Frasco to comfort herself. The first time they met, perhaps. She'd been putting away the costumes from the last show in the wardrobe rooms when there was a knock on the door. She looked up to see Alejandro, the artistic director of the theatre, and a strange man standing in the doorway, tall, with dark hair. She walked towards them, smoothing her hair behind her ears, and the stranger had smiled at her, leaning against the doorframe.

“Ana, this is Frasco Barea, our new writer in residence. Frasco, this is Ana Valledares, our talented costume designer.”

Ana smiled at Alejandro's compliment, and held out her hand to Frasco, recognising his name from the front page of the script that Alejandro had given her a few days before. He took her hand and looked directly into her eyes.

“I came to see the last production and I was impressed by your work,” he said, smiling at her.

“Thank you. I enjoyed reading your script very much. I've already sketched out a few ideas for the main character, Don Rafael. Would you like to look at them?”

Alejandro turned in the doorway. “I'll leave you two to get on with things.”

Frasco remained, leaning in the doorway, as Ana went over to her drawing board and searched through the designs. She could feel his eyes on her, but she didn't feel self-conscious or embarrassed. She turned and motioned him over beside her. He moved through a silence that seemed suddenly crystallised, loud above the blur of sounds of the theatre; voices calling from the dressing rooms, hammering from the stage, footsteps in the rehearsal rooms overhead, and the sighs and creaks of the building itself. The sound of their breathing seemed to ebb and flow like the ocean, and she was at once very conscious that they were alone. She glanced up and sideways, at the profile of his face, and he turned and caught her

staring. They looked at each other, and the moment seemed to both expand and contract, suspended in time. Then he broke the tension by smiling, and pointing with his finger.

“I like this one in particular.”

“Thank you, Senor Barea.”

He laughed. “You make me feel old, Senorita. Call me Frasco, please!”

“All right then, Frasco, but only if you call me Ana.”

“It’s a deal, Ana.”

Her name had sounded lovely in his mouth.

Ana could recall that moment with such precision that it made her heart turn over. Even though she had been involved with Jacinto for almost a year, seemingly inextricably, she had been instantly drawn to Frasco. And now she was one step closer to seeing him, but at what cost? For there were only five days left until her next appointment with the captain, and she didn’t know what to do.

There was a knock on the door. She jumped to her feet, her heart hammering in her chest. It was her sister Isabella, whose heels clicked on the wooden floor as she walked over to the windows and opened up the shutters.

“Why is it so dark in here?” She turned to face Ana, and her hand flew to her mouth.

“Jesus, you look terrible!”

Ana looked at her sister in the light and saw that her eyes were puffy and tired.

“So do you.”

“I have an excuse.”

“So do I!”

“Ana, Frasco’s been away for two years, and now he’s in prison. Do you really think that he’s coming back? You can’t sit around crying all day. You need to get on with your life, because Frasco’s part of the past. He’ll be exported to Russia, and quite right too. We don’t need godless men like that in the New Spain.”

“Don’t parrot Manuel’s opinions at me like that,” said Ana wearily. The two sisters regarded each other from either side of the room, hands on hips, legs planted apart. “Why are you here, Isabella?”

Isabella’s eyes filled with tears. “Mama’s sick.”

Ana didn’t speak.

“Tuberculosis. The doctor said it’s in the bones, that there’s nothing to be done. She’s very weak, but she asked to see you.”



“Where is she?”

“You know where she is.”

“I’m not going to Aurelia’s house. I’m not welcome.”

“Nobody’s asking you to choose between your husband and your family. You already made that choice. She’s dying, Anacita, and she wants to see her youngest daughter.”

The use of the diminutive brought a lump to Ana’s throat but she swallowed it, knowing that the tears would just sit behind her eyes.

“I’ll get my bag.”

When the two sisters arrived outside the door Isabella turned to Ana.

“We have a couple of hours. Manuel has gone out to his club and Aurelia doesn’t want him to know that you’ve been here, so the servants have been told that that you’re a cousin of ours.”

“What? Manuel doesn’t know I’m here? It doesn’t sit right with me, Isabella, to enter somebody’s house without their knowledge.”

Isabella took Ana’s arm above the elbow, the way she used to hold it when they were children, sent on an errand and crossing a busy street or plaza.

“You don’t have to hold my arm, Isabella. I’m not about to run away.”

“This isn’t about what Manuel wants or about what you want. It’s about Mama.”

Isabella knocked on the door and it was opened by a woman who bowed slightly, eyes lowered.

“Dona Aurelia is with your mother, Senora.”

“Thank you Elenora. This is my cousin Concha. She’s come to see my mother.”

Elenora curtsied. “Senora.”

The last time Ana had been in this house was almost five years ago. She’d come over for one of her increasingly infrequent visits and her mother had insisted she stay for dinner. There had been eight of them; Ana, Isabella and Pedro, Manuel and Aurelia, her mother and two priests, Padre Gonzalez and Padre Sebastian. Ana was picking over her food. She hated this house, the air was difficult to breathe. Manuel had been holding court from the end of the table about the Second Republic.

“They should be thrown out,” he’d said, a forkful of food poised in front of him, “they’re turning the entire country upside down. These elections are long overdue. They’ll never get a second term.”

"I'll be voting for CEDA," Aurelia said.

"Of course you will," said Manuel, "they're getting my vote."

"Why not vote for the government that gave you the vote in the first place?" said Ana.  
"What do you think, Isabella?"

"I don't know anything about politics," said Isabella. "Will you pass the bread?"

"Isabella's right," Manuel said. "Politics belong in the public sphere, and women in the private, and the two should have nothing to do with one another. Don't you agree, Pedro, that your wife is quite right?"

Pedro shrugged. "Politics give me indigestion," he said.

"The Church's position-" began Padre Sebastian.

Manuel cut him off, turning to Ana. "You could learn something from your sisters' attitudes. And if you don't have a husband to tell you how to vote, don't vote at all."

"I'm entitled to my opinion," said Ana.

"That's the problem with this government," said Manuel, "everybody suddenly has a sense of entitlement. Just look at those damn peasants. Agrarian reform – it's legalised theft, that's what it is."

"The peasants are the ones who work the land," said Ana. "Why shouldn't they-" "I think it's rude to contradict Manuel in his own house," her mother had said sharply, and Aurelia smiled across the table.

"This is the government," Manuel continued, "that have destroyed the army, stolen property from the Church, and prevented nuns and priests like yourselves from teaching."

The priests had nodded solemnly, their mouths working busily at the food.

"Prevented them from brainwashing the next generation," muttered Ana.

The two priests went goggle eyed with shock and Isabella giggled.

"Ana!" Her mother's tone was scandalised.

"What do women know about politics anyway?" Manuel said. "You've been infected by that socialist you've been running around with."

Ana put her fork down next to her plate. "I thought I needed a man to tell me how to think."

Aurelia glared at her.

"If he was a respectable man, perhaps," Manuel said. "But not some rojo from Barcelona."

"He's not a Communist," said Ana, "but even if he was, who are you to tell me who to spend time with?"

Everyone had stopped eating, even the priests, all watching Manuel and Ana. Her mother had her hand over her mouth.

“You’re nothing but an embarrassment to this family.”

“And you’re nothing but a bully!”

Manuel’s face went red.

“Ana that is enough!” her mother said.

Manuel stood up. “How dare you speak to me like that in my own home!”

“Manuel, please sit down,” said Aurelia.

“Shut up,” he said.

“You let him speak to you like that?” said Ana.

“Shut your mouth or get out!” Manuel shouted.

Ana pushed her plate away and stood up. “I don’t know why you don’t divorce him,” she said to Aurelia, “when, thanks to the government, now you can.”

This was the first time she’d been back since that meal. Four years was a long time, she thought to herself as she followed Isabella up a wide, curving staircase, down a long hall, and through a doorway. There, in a bed, in the middle of the room, was her mother. She wouldn’t have thought that four years could produce such a change in anybody. She hadn’t been prepared for the wasted frame, the bloodless face, the two spots of colour high on her cheekbones, the bones showing through the skin. Her mother had always been slim and pale, with refined features and brown hair. Aurelia, sitting by the bedside, rosaries laced through her fingers, eyes closed and lips moving in prayer, was the most like their mother, and for a moment Ana saw her mother the way she had been in childhood. It was uncanny, the two women, so alike, one healthy, one clearly dying. And yet, though she saw all this, though she registered it, she didn’t feel it. Only when she crossed the room and sat down next to the bed, taking her mother’s cold hand in hers, did the fact of her mother’s imminent death come home to her.

“Mama.”

Aurelia looked up, eyes full of dislike, and turned to Isabella. “She came.”

“Of course she came, Aurelia.”

Ana’s mother had opened her eyes and was struggling to sit up, but after a moment she sank back into her pillow. Her eyes flickered over Ana and she reached out a hand and gestured towards the dresser.

“What is it Mama?” asked Isabella, leaning over the bed.

“Fetch me my pearls,” she said, her voice a strained whisper.

Isabella opened a drawer, then another, and withdrew a small velvet bag. Ana’s mouth opened in surprise. She knew of the tradition, the pearl necklace that had been in her mother’s family for almost two hundred years, passed to the youngest daughter of the family, who would pass it to their youngest daughter, and so on. She’d never imagined that she would receive them, though. Yet her mother was pushing the pearls into her hand, closing her fingers over them.

“For my youngest daughter,” she whispered. “They glow. The warmth of your skin and the heat of your blood will make them glow, Anacita, when you wear them.”

Ana, again, felt the presence of tears she couldn’t cry. Instead she pressed her mother’s hand, trying to impart some of her strength to her mother.

“All these years...It was wrong, Anacita. It was a mistake.”

The old resentment flared inside her but she kept her voice calm. “Frasco was – is – a good man, Mama. He’s made me happy.”

“I know, Ana. The mistake was mine. He reminded me so much of your father-”

“He was a good man too, Mama.”

“I know. It was I who wanted more, and more for my daughters, too.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Mama. I know you were doing what you thought was best. Anyway, I’m here now.”

Her mother smiled, gripping Ana’s hand. Ana looked down and couldn’t help thinking of the difference between her mother’s hands, smooth and white, the nails polished and manicured, and Elisa’s hands. She thought of the captain’s request again and shivered. What could she bring him?

“You were always like your father, you know. You did what you wanted, you always have, even as a child.”

Ana smiled. She was very conscious of Aurelia glaring at her from the other side of the bed and of Isabella standing by the door, watching the clock.

“Did you have children, Anacita?”

“No Mama, not yet.”

“Well, you’ll have a daughter now, so that you can pass the pearls on.”

“I will, Mama.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“And you won’t make the mistakes I made.” Her mother closed her eyes with an expression of infinite weariness.

At that moment, a door opened and closed and a male voice echoed through the hallway.

“The restaurant at the club was shut, Elenora. Tell Pedro to put something on for me. Where’s my wife?”

Elenora’s voice was inaudible but they could hear Manuel’s reply.

“Who the hell is Concha?”

Aurelia and Isabella looked at each other with barely disguised panic as heavy footsteps came up the stairs.

“Hide! You’ll have to hide!” Aurelia hissed, the first words she’d spoken to Ana since she’d arrived.

Ana looked round, bewildered. “Hide?”

They could hear Manuel approaching the door of the room. Ana stood and smoothed down her skirt with her hands. The door opened.

“Hello Manuel. I am in your house without your permission, for that I apologise, but my mother wished to see me.”

Manuel stared at her for a moment, eyes full of fury, and then turned to Aurelia. “Outside. Now.”

The rosary beads fell from between Aurelia’s fingers with a clicking sound. She moved towards the doorway, flashing Ana a hate-filled glance. Isabella moved to follow her and Ana turned back to her mother, whose eyes were still closed. Ana kissed her cheek. Her mother’s skin was as soft and fragile as the wing of a butterfly.

“Goodbye, Mama,” she whispered. The ghost of a smile appeared on her mother’s face. Then Ana left the room. The sound of voices led her down the hallway.

“How do you think that makes me look, you stupid bitch!”

Aurelia was sobbing, trying to turn her face away, her long, elegant neck curving away from him, but with every turn, he’d shake her a little and her head would snap back.

“Stop that!” said Ana, shocked.

“Manuel, please, this isn’t Aurelia’s fault. Mama asked to see Anacita. She’s a dying woman, Manuel.”

But he ignored Isabella, the full force of his venom directed at his wife, hissing into her face.

“How do you think it looks to have the wife of a traitor in my house? I told you her and that communist were forbidden to come here, and what do I find when I come home?”

“I didn’t...How could I...”

Ana could barely understand Aurelia, incoherent with distress. It was disturbing, a side of her composed elder sister she’d never seen before.

“Making me a fool in front of the servants. A man who doesn’t know what’s happening in his own house. It’s only through my generosity that your mother’s not in the poorhouse. Or have you forgotten that, idiota? Have you forgotten who’s been paying the doctor for the last six months, eh?”

Ana reached the bottom of the stairs and he turned ferocious eyes on her, but Ana spoke first, her voice cold and clear, carrying through the cool air of the hall.

“I suppose you’d rather look a tyrant than a fool, eh Manuel?”

His mouth opened and closed and his hands dropped from his wife’s shoulders. Aurelia stared at Ana, eyes wide, hand over mouth, and behind them Isabella shook her head frantically.

“There’s a dying woman upstairs. Are you not ashamed?”

“Get out of my house!” His voice was a bellow.

Isabella followed her out the door. They went through the garden and out on to the sunlit street without speaking until Ana, glancing at her sister’s profile, broke the silence.

“And it’s my husband you disapprove of?”

Isabella’s lips were pursed. “That was all your fault!”

“Let me guess, he’s never spoken to her like that before, am I right?”

Isabella lifted her shoulders and let them fall again. “Their marriage is none of my business, and whether I like Manuel or not has nothing to do with anything. Aurelia’s my sister and that’s that.”

“It’s a whole different thing when the husband owns a factory, eh?”

There was a moment of silence before Isabella spoke.

“Well, I’m sorry, all right?”

Ana looked at her, surprised. She’d been quarrelling with Isabella since she could speak and this was the first time in her memory that Isabella had apologised for anything. The sisters walked on in silence until they reached the streets of the centre. The warm, sour smell of the river reached Ana’s nostrils and she stopped and put a hand over her eyes.

“Anacita?” Isabella’s voice was concerned.

Ana shook her head. “I’m fine. Listen, I’m going to visit a friend.”

“But it’s almost curfew.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry.”

“Which way are you walking?”

“Over the river.”

Isabella wrinkled her nose with distaste. “Is it safe to walk there in the evening?”

“I live there, you know. You don’t have to make that face.” But she softened her words with a smile, which Isabella returned. “How long until Mama...”

Isabella’s eyes filled with tears. “The doctor says it could be anytime but she won’t last beyond the start of the cold weather.”

“I know that I can’t see her again, but let me know how she’s keeping, will you?”

“Of course.”

They embraced, and the heat of Isabella’s skin, the pressure of her hands on Ana’s back, warmed her against the cool breeze of the evening.

## Madrigueras, February 1937

After dinner, which was garbanzos – chickpeas – again, there was a political meeting. The dishes were cleared away and Michael, Johnny and Charlie all squeezed on to the benches that faced the stage at the back of the hall along with everyone else. Peter Kerrigan, the political commissar for the English speaking International Brigades at Albacete and Madrigueras, got up on to the stage. The meeting was opened with a report of how things were going in Jarama. The British Battalion had left Madrigueras on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February, a couple of days after Michael's group had arrived, and they'd been on the front line for a couple of weeks now, trying to halt the Nationalist advance on Madrid. It was going well, according to Kerrigan.

“There have been heavy losses but the tide is starting to turn. Franco's troops have been throwing everything they've got at our boys, shells, bombs, overhead shrapnel, Moorish cavalry, but the lads are standing their ground, pushing back slowly but surely against the fascist monster that has slaughtered thousands of women and children from the air, that has sought to crush the legally elected government of the Spanish Republic, that has recruited Italian fascists and German Nazis to suppress their own people...”

With every day that passed, Michael was more and more certain that he had made the right choice to come to Spain. He'd heard a lot about the fascist states in Italy and Germany over the last month. It wasn't a civil war, despite what the British and French governments said. It was a war between ideas, between two possible futures, not just for Spain but for Europe. He'd seen the swastika flag raised over the entrance to Ibrox stadium last October, when Scotland had played Germany, and he'd been disgusted. Glasgow was a socialist city, a working man's city, and it should never have been allowed. But it was symptomatic. There had been creeping accessions to fascism all over the country and it had to stop. There had been Blackshirts in London, smashing up Jewish shops. Michael wasn't like Charlie; the family had never been very political, but it seemed to him there was no generosity of spirit in the politics of fascism, and it would spread across Europe unless it was stopped in Spain.

After the reports from all fronts there was a discussion about British aid for the Spanish Republic, a different man reading out editorials from papers back home that were either for or against Spain. Some people stood up and asked questions or made suggestions, quoting bits from Lenin and from Marx. Michael felt a bit out of his depth and Johnny sat quietly rolling a cigarette, but Charlie stood up two or three times. Even though he was younger, he was much more politically educated than either of them. He seemed suddenly



authoritative, his narrow shoulders back and his voice loud, very different from the diffidence and easy going humour they'd come to expect from him.

"We all have a duty to write home, not just to our families but to the newspapers as well, and to urge our relatives to do the same. Editorials are all very well but facts, not opinion, will be our best weapon in the war against the propaganda of the Daily Mail and the Evening Citizen, the Evening Times and the Daily Express. Once the British public knows the truth about the war and the reason we're all here they can't fail to support the Spanish Republic." The men cheered him and Charlie sat back down, his face flushed but happy.

"Reckon we've found the Battalion's next political commissar, what do you think Mickey?" whispered Johnny, and Charlie beamed across at them. After more discussion the meeting ended with a chorus of the Internationale and the men all started filing out of the hall.

"They'll all be rushing off to write letters to the Daily Express, thanks to you," said Johnny, and Charlie laughed. "Now that you've sorted out the propaganda problem, how about using your oratorical skills to get us something apart from garbanzos for dinner?"

"Do you fancy going into the village for a walk?" said Michael as they reached the front door. The evening air was cool, but not too cold, refreshing after the warmth of the hall and the fug of cigarette smoke that still floated above their heads.

"For a walk," said Johnny, pulling his folded cap out of his pocket, "or for a gander at the señoritas? Quite the ladies man, this one," and Charlie laughed again as Johnny settled his cap down on his head.

The main street stretched the length of the village, lined with bars and cafes and all different kinds of shops. "Up the main street and down the same street," Johnny liked to say, but it was always busy at this hour in the evening, the entire population of the village turning out to parade along the street. There were old men sitting outside cafes absorbed in silent games of checkers or cards, children playing games in the middle of the road. Young girls walked up and down, arm in arm, giggling whenever they passed a group of Brigadiers. They were well watched by their mothers and aunts, who usually walked a few paces behind, dressed uniformly in black. Johnny liked to raise his cap to the older women, just to see what reaction he got, and their stern demeanour would sometimes dissolve into giggles as well. Other times, though, his exaggerated gesture would be met with frosty stares, so he'd take it even further and blow them a kiss before strolling on with Michael and Charlie.

The tavern was at the very end of the main street and when they arrived they were waved over to a table by Bill, Eddie and Harry, who were sitting with cups of coffee and glasses of water in front of them. Eddie rose as they came over. "Coffee, everyone?" he said.

Michael and Charlie nodded, but Johnny said, "I'm going to see if I can talk a bottle of wine out of Rosa." Rosa worked behind the bar, a tall, well made girl with firm legs and long hair that she continually tossed behind her back. Half the men in the base were in love with her, even though she refused to serve them alcohol. They were given a cup of wine with the midday meal and with dinner, but apart from that there was a strict alcohol prohibition in Madrigueras.

"No chance mate," said Harry.

"Well I think we deserve a celebratory drink," said Johnny.

"What are we celebrating?" asked Michael.

Johnny paused for a moment, and then said, "The turning of the tide at Jarama, of course!" They all nodded in agreement, and the five of them watched Johnny make his way through the tables and over to the bar where Rosa was standing, polishing a glass with a cloth.

"We'll be waiting half an hour now while he flirts with Rosa, and it'll all be for nothing," said Charlie good humouredly, "she'll never give him a bottle of wine." When Johnny returned from the bar balancing six glasses of coffee on a tray, nobody was surprised.

"Told you it'd do no good," said Harry. "They're strict as hell about it."

"I suppose training drill wouldn't be much fun with a raging hangover," said Eddie.

Johnny just smiled at them and took a drink of his coffee. Michael followed suit and realised the coffee was cold, and sweeter than usual, but with an aftertaste that burned in his throat.

"What is it that we're drinking, Johnny?" he said.

"Café frío," said Johnny, rolling the r of frío extravagantly.

"And what, exactly, is café frío?" asked Charlie.

"Cold coffee and rum. Thought you might be a bit sick of wine," said Johnny, grinning. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd rather a beer any day, but beggars can't be choosers, eh?"

"Well, here's to Johnny, the master of persuasion," said Bill, raising his drink, and they all clinked glasses.

"So how do you think you got on with the weapons training today?" said Johnny. They'd heard the rumour that morning that a shipment of rifles had arrived from the Soviet

Union, and sure enough, after breakfast they'd been split into groups of twenty and each group given a rifle. They were long, the metal shiny and dark and a hammer and sickle emblazoned on the handle. They'd passed it round the group. Charlie had been even more keyed up than he was, he'd been in the Young Communist League since he was fourteen and his dad was a card carrying Communist. He practically worshipped the Soviet Union. "A real Russian rifle," he'd kept saying, running his thumb over the hammer and sickle. "I'm holding a real Russian rifle." After they'd been shown how to load, dismantle and clean the gun, and then put it back together, they'd been taken out of the village on trucks to a makeshift shooting range. Michael had never fired a gun before and his first shot was nowhere near the target, but most of the group were as inexperienced as he was. They'd spent most of the day practising until his ears were ringing with the sound of shots, but he got steadily better, his arms getting used to the weight of the weapon, his fingers sliding more readily round the trigger. The rifles were very accurate and by the end of the day Michael and Johnny were both fairly good shots. Charlie, however, hadn't done so well. He couldn't seem to master the kick of the rifle and each time he fired he'd winced and rubbed his shoulder.

"I don't think I quite got the knack of it," he was saying now.

"Ah, give it another couple of days and you'll be a pro," said Johnny.

Michael let the rest of them talk, not really listening, thinking of the moment that morning when he'd first felt the weight of the gun in his hands. A strange thrill had gone through him. Here was a weapon that had travelled across Europe, all the way from the Soviet Union, and before long he'd be doing his part for the Spanish Republic and the preservation of democracy. He wondered what it would be like to be in a battle, worried about how he'd react. He didn't want to look a fool or a coward but he couldn't imagine it, couldn't imagine how he'd react to bullets coming at him, bombs dropping, men dying before his eyes. He'd have to kill other soldiers, other men like him. He was afraid of his own fear, he thought, and then shook his head, dismissing the thought as ridiculous. He'd be fine, the same as the rest of them.

"What about you, Michael?" said Harry, his voice breaking into his thoughts.

"What?" said Michael.

"The best goal you ever saw," said Bill. "We were just talking about it."

"Well, I saw a cracker of a goal when I was eleven," said Michael.

"Aye?" Johnny said.

"It was the Scottish Cup final, 1925 it was, at Hampden."

"Is that the Celtic stadium or the Rangers stadium?" asked Eddie.

“It’s not either, it’s just a stadium for Scottish teams, that right Johnny?”

“Aye,” said Johnny, taking another drink of his café frió.

“Celtic were playing Dundee, and me and my da and my brothers all went along.

Dundee were one up at half time, it had been a close fought first half, but half an hour into the second half Peter Wilson passed the ball to Patsy Gallagher. The Dundee defence were straight on him but he skipped past them all, I can still remember it, they couldn’t seem to get near him. Everyone was holding their breath to see if he’d put Celtic back in the game, and then Napper Thomson made a lunge for him. It would’ve been a fierce tackle if he’d got at him, but Patsy was that close to the goal that he jumped out of the way of it, the ball wedged between his feet, and did a tumble-cat-ma into the goal.”

“A what?” said Harry.

“Jumped heels over head, right over with the ball between his feet, and landed in the goal. All tangled up in the net he was, and the crowd just went wild for it.” Michael could still remember the roar that had risen from the stands. He’d been on his da’s shoulders, had seen the whole thing. Edward had seen it too but Manus had missed it, too busy eating his hot pie. He smiled at the memory.

“Bloody hell,” said Harry, taking a drink. “Sounds like that one should be in the record books.”

“Aye,” said Michael. He glanced round and realised Johnny was looking at him strangely.

“You’re a Celtic fan?” said Johnny.

Michael shrugged. “Aye. I don’t go to the games so much any more, but I used to go every Saturday when I was in the bevellers and had the money.”

Johnny shrugged. “Didn’t realise you were a Tim, that’s all.”

“A Tim?” said Charlie.

“A Catholic.”

There was a moment of silence at the table and Michael rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. “I’m not dead religious or anything.”

“It’s your mob that are telling everyone that the militias are raping nuns and burning churches and the like, saying it’s a war against religion they’re fighting,” said Harry.

“Well that’s not what I think,” said Michael. He could feel his face going red.

“I’m away up to get more drinks,” Eddie said. “Or will I send Johnny? He’s the one with the charm after all!” Everyone ignored him.

“Setting the Fascists up as defenders of the faith and all that,” said Charlie, “and the Republic as the army of the devil. The Vatican’s firmly on the side of Franco.”

Michael put his hands into his pockets, on the defensive. “Well what has that to do with me?” he said, and as he spoke realised that the miraculous medal was still in his pocket. He turned it over in his fingers. “I mean, there are a few priests saying that-”

“A few?” said Charlie. “They’ve been preaching it from every altar in the country.”

“Well when I was leaving for Spain our parish priest, Father McKenna, sent down a miraculous medal to the house, for luck,” said Michael, “so they’re not all against the republic.”

“What’s a miraculous medal?” said Bill.

Michael put the small tin disc out on the table and they all passed it round.

“Who’s the picture of?”

“Saint Michael,” he said shortly. “He’s the patron saint of soldiers.”

“It’s all superstition,” said Johnny.

Michael shrugged, putting the medal back in his pocket. “Think what you like,” he said.

“Just don’t know why a Catholic would be over fighting for Communism,” said Charlie.

Michael looked at him. “I’m fighting against fascism, not for Communism.”

Charlie shrugged and there was an awkward silence, broken by Eddie, again. “Who’s for more drinks then?” he said. Their glasses were mostly empty and Michael drained his off, more for something to do than because he had a thirst.

“I’ll come up and give you a hand,” said Johnny, “sure it’s me she’s taken a shine to.”

“So do you reckon the weapons training means we’ll be going up to the front line soon?” said Bill.

The talk went on and Michael made an effort to join in, but he felt self conscious. After a few more rounds, though, the feeling wore off and he started enjoying himself again. They were the last to leave at the end of the night, all a bit pissed. Rosa held the door for them and Johnny stopped before her, clasping her face between his hands and kissing her extravagantly on both cheeks. She rolled her eyes but she was smiling. Charlie was next; he gave her a quick peck on the cheek then hurried out the door, his face red. When Michael kissed her a warmth came off her skin and a sudden feeling of longing rose up and engulfed him, longing for a different girl, a different place, but that same, shocking warmth of someone else’s skin. It was probably the rum, but once outside he had to put his hand against

the rough stone wall of the bar to steady himself. Johnny lifted his eyebrows at him but Michael shook his head, and Johnny shrugged and said nothing. Bill, then Eddie filed past, kissing her on the cheek before stumbling out into the street. Harry, who was the drunkest, trailing out at the end, kissed her and then dropped to his knees and declared, “Rosa, you’re the love of my life. Will you marry me and come back to London with me when the war’s over?”

Rosa laughed and kicked him gently. “You inglés, all crazy. I am already married.”

“Your husband can come too!” said Harry as Bill dragged him to his feet.

“Buenas noche,” she said, shaking her head and laughing as she closed the door behind them.

The night air was cold on Michael’s cheeks. He felt both surprisingly alert and fairly tipsy, unsteady on his feet, and he staggered and almost fell when Johnny slung an arm around his shoulders. “All right Mickey?”

“Aye, Johnny, I’m grand.”

“Here, about that craic earlier about the football...”

Michael shook his head from side to side, the movement making him feel slightly sick. “Ah never worry, sure I know there was nothing in it.”

“All right then,” said Johnny, a note of relief in his voice. “How’s Charlie getting on?”

Charlie smiled beatifically and nodded his head. Bill and Harry were walking behind them, weaving from side to side, Eddie alongside them, placing one foot in front of the other.

“I fancy a song to get us down the road,” said Johnny, but when Eddie and Bill broke into the Internationale he groaned. “I’m sick to the back teeth of that song! What about something from home? Mickey’ll know a tune, sing us a wee song, eh Mickey? What about ‘A fine wee lass, a bonny wee lass, is bonny wee Jeannie McColl, I gave her my granny’s engagement ring and a bonny wee tartan shawl...”

Michael joined in and their voices echoed down the street, bouncing off the walls.

“Come on Charlie, sing up!” Johnny said.

Charlie shook his head from side to side, eyes closed and frowning with concentration. “You’ll need to teach me,” he said, his words slightly slurred.

“What’ll we teach him, Mickey?”

Michael shrugged. “I don’t know. What about...” He trailed off, his mind having gone a complete blank. “Scots Wha Hae?”

“Load of shite,” said Johnny. “I know, I know the one. Right, Charlie, this one’s for listening. I expect you to have all the words perfect by the time we get back to the base.” He started to sing, his voice hoarse, and a shiver went up and back down Michael’s spine as he listened.

“I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow town...”

He’d heard Manus singing it many a time as they walked home together, a favourite when he was pissed.

“There’s nothing the matter with Glasgow ‘cause it’s going round and round...” The last time he’d heard Manus singing it had been just before Christmas. He’d been out with Manus and Edward and they were heading across Victoria Bridge into the Gorbals when Manus had broken into song.

“I’m only a common old working chap, as anyone here can see...”

His voice had echoed off the river, and first Edward, then Michael had joined in. When they’d made it across to Gorbals Street indignant shouts came from tenement windows but they’d just laughed, arms across each other’s shoulders, staggering up the road, their step as well as their voices in unison.

“But when I’ve had a couple of drinks on a Saturday, Glasgow belongs to me!”

Before Michael could become too nostalgic he was distracted by Harry being spectacularly sick at the side of the road. They stopped and waited for him.

“Hmmm,” said Johnny.

“What?” said Charlie.

“I’ve just noticed,” said Johnny conversationally, “that garbanzos look exactly the same coming up as they do on your plate. Except those ones are mixed with quite a lot of café frío, of course.”

They all burst out laughing and their laughter echoed, just as their singing had done, down the street and out across the fields, under a sky that was bright with large, low hanging stars.

## Elisa

Ana hurried across the river, keeping her eyes on the stones under her feet. As she walked, the ugly scene between Manuel and Aurelia came back to her and she shook her head.

Aurelia had always been impressed by material things and had barely disguised her sneer the first time she met Frasco. But after today, Ana pitied her. She and Frasco had been happy together and that was more important than living in a fancy house on the right side of the river. A memory suddenly flashed into her head of one winter evening after they'd been married a few months. She'd been coming home from the theatre and met Frasco staggering up the stairs, carrying an enormous pot of hot water.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked, astonished.

"Santa Maria, you scared me!" he said, his eyes wide and startled. "Wait here, don't move!"

Ana was cold from the walk home and had been looking forward to the warmth of the apartment, but she sat down on the stairs and waited. She could hear Frasco clattering back down the stairs. When he reached her he slid a warm hand inside her collar and kissed her.

"You have to shut your eyes when we reach the door, and don't open them until I say you can, all right?"

He was grinning like a little boy and Ana couldn't help but laugh back at him.

"Agreed. What are you up to?"

But he didn't say another word, just tugged her up the stairs, his hand warm in hers. When they reached the door of the apartment, she shut her eyes obediently and he led her inside.

"Now you can look."

Ana opened her eyes and for a moment, everything looked the same. And then she saw it, in front of the stove. An enormous tub made of tin, the metal scratched and battered, but shining, and full of steaming water.

"What on earth is that?"

"It's a surprise!"

She'd walked over and dipped her hand in the warm water.

"It's a bath! Do you like it?"

Turning to him, her face split in a smile, she'd said, "Of course I like it! It's amazing! But how-"

"Quick, no questions, just get in before the water gets cold!"



He'd helped her to unwrap her scarf, unbutton her coat and dress, pull off her underclothes, and he'd sat down on the floor beside the bathtub as she'd stood in the warm water. Her feet tingled in the sudden change from cold to hot. She could feel the heat of the water rising up her legs and she sat down, twisting her hair into a knot at the top of her head to keep it dry. Frasco rolled his sleeves up above his elbows and scooped a handful of water over her shoulders, the warm drops trickling down her bare skin. She smiled at him and drew her knees up to her chest, feeling suddenly shy.

"How did you do this?"

His voice was full of pride as he explained, "I saw it in the market today and I thought, that's how royalty wash, in a bath, not standing up in a bucket."

"But how did you heat all this water? It must have taken hours! How did you keep it warm?"

"Oh, I told everyone in the building about how dirty my wife was and how she really needed a wash, and they all felt so sorry for me they boiled a pot of water each. Aiya!"

Ana had splashed him with the water, laughing. "You deserved that, you need a wash more than me!"

"I was worried you'd be home before it was ready, but you were right on time. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful cariño."

"So how was your day, querida mia?"

Once the water started to cool she'd asked him for a towel and stood up, knee deep in water. Instead of passing her a towel, he'd lifted her out of the tub, one arm under her back and the other under her knees, and carried her through to their bed. Her hair came loose as he lifted her and hung down over his arms, strands sticking to her shoulders. Her skin was wet, shining in the lamplight, gleaming drops of water sliding slowly down the sides of her body, dampening his arms and chest.

"Your clothes..."

"I don't care."

"And the bed..."

"I don't care."

She pulled off his clothes, dry skin against damp, and their desire made them ferocious, gripping one another's bodies tightly, bruising their mouths with kisses, fingers digging into skin.

She'd arrived at the brothel almost without knowing it. Her chest was tight with tension and she was angry with herself for letting memories upset her so. The thought of her mother only made it worse. And she had to meet the captain in five days time. She'd hardly thought of what to bring him, she couldn't think what would satisfy him, but looking down at her hands, she knew that she had to find something. She leant against the doorway for a moment, composing herself, and then knocked at the door. After a couple of minutes Marguerita answered, dressed in a slip with a make up pencil in her hand, one eye painted. A smile broke over her face.

"Ana!"

"Is Mercedes in?"

"Yes she is, come in!"

Ana followed her inside and up the stairs, barely noticing the rooms which had made such an impression on her before.

"Mercedes is in there," Marguerita said, gesturing at an open door. "I'll be through in a minute."

Ana peered round the doorway and saw Mercedes sitting at a dressing table, cigarette in one hand and brush in the other, applying rouge with a sweeping motion. An expression of pleasure crossed her face when she saw Ana in the mirror.

"Come in, how nice to see you sister!" Her voice was warm but as Ana stepped into the light it faltered.

"Ana...what's happened to you?"

Ana didn't reply. Mercedes stood up from the table and crossed the room, coming to stand in front of her. She looked into her eyes, and lifted her hand to touch her face. "Your eyes..."

Ana put her hand over Mercedes' and shut her eyes tightly. Mercedes pulled her hand away and forced her down into a sitting position on a stool.

"When I first spoke to you, Ana, I asked you why you were looking for the artist, and you said you were looking for eyes that had truly seen. What did you mean? What's happened to you?"

Although Ana had come with the intention of asking Mercedes for help, suddenly she couldn't bear to hear her story said aloud. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you just now. I'll explain another time."

"But-"

"Please, Mercedes. Don't ask me."

“If that’s what you want, Ana. But if I can help you in any way, you only have to ask.”

Ana leant forward and put her arms around her. The warmth and solidity of her body was reassuring, and strands of her long loose hair slid through Ana’s fingers.

“Give me something else to think about.”

“Well, Simona left.”

“Simona left? Why?”

“Gabito asked her to marry him and she said yes. They were married two days ago.”

“That’s wonderful!”

Mercedes laughed grimly. “Is it?” She stubbed the cigarette out with a vicious twist. “They’ve gone to live with his father. He used to go to the brothel Marguerita worked in, before it closed. He’s a brute, by all accounts.”

“She didn’t have to say yes.”

“I suppose. But I worry for her, in that house. Still, she was lucky that he’s taken them in, with no dowry or anything.”

“Well it’s better than a brothel, no?” Ana had spoken without thinking and blood rushed to her face. There was a pause.

“Well, Luisa was furious. She’s been in a black mood for days.” Mercedes swivelled round on her chair, back to the mirror. As she moved her kimono fell open. Ana could see her reflection in the mirror, her breasts, shaped like teardrops and dark nipples, her flat stomach with small wrinkles of skin at the sides, and a dark triangle of pubic hair between her crossed legs. She looked away, embarrassed, as Mercedes made a movement, tugging the kimono together again.

“Why was she so angry? Was it not one less mouth to feed?”

“Simona made a lot of money for Luisa before the war and it looks like the fighting’s coming to an end.”

Ana leant forward, clasping her hands together eagerly.

“Do you think so? Maybe they’ll release the prisoners soon! How do you know?”

“Men talk in bed.” Mercedes looked at Ana carefully. “But I don’t think they’ll be sending the milicianos home to their wives, sister, not the Spanish ones, anyway. It won’t be that kind of victory.” Her expression was one of pity. “But anyway, I think Luisa’s angry because she was counting on Simona making her a lot of money after the war as well.”

“But she should be happy for Simona.”

“That’s not how she sees it. As far as she’s concerned, Simona belonged to her, and Gabito stole her. She was livid. Blamed you for talking about your husband, putting romantic ideas in Simona’s head.”

“And she’s still angry?”

“Don’t worry, she’s still having her siesta, she won’t be up for another half hour. But it might be best if you’re not here when she wakes.”

Ana rose and Mercedes put out a hand.

“No, don’t go yet. Listen, are you sure you don’t want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“I’m sure. I should go anyway, it’s almost dark, and I should get home.”

“But you won’t make it before the curfew. What if you get caught by a patrol?”

“I won’t.”

“Come again soon, sister. Luisa sleeps all afternoon, come earlier next time.”

Ana nodded and Mercedes stood up to accompany her downstairs. As Ana walked away down the street, through the gathering shadows, she looked back at Mercedes, standing in the doorway, watching her go.

Ana had intended to go straight to her own apartment but as she passed Elisa’s door she heard the sound of coughing, a racking sound that came from the chest. Concerned, she pushed the door open and looked inside. The apartment was warm and stuffy. Elisa was sitting in one of the easy chairs next to the stove, a cup of tea and a glass of water on the low table next to her, a blanket over her legs. There were dark shadows under her eyes, and her skin was pale and looked slack, somehow. But the smile that spread over her face when she saw Ana in the doorway was undiminished.

“Hola nina! You’re home late. Is it not after curfew?”

Ana came in, frowning. “Yes, but I ran home, and I didn’t meet any patrols.”

“It’s not the patrols that worry me. They found a body only a couple of streets away, the day before yesterday.”

“Oh?” Ana couldn’t help but notice the hoarseness of Elisa’s voice.

“Pasquala told me about it today. A tramp, she said, an old man.”

“Maybe he died of natural causes,” said Ana.

“No,” said Elisa, shaking her head. “When they found him he’d had his heart cut out.”

“That’s horrible,” said Ana. She could feel goosebumps rising on her skin. “Who would do such a thing? The story is probably exaggerated.”

Elisa shrugged.

“You don’t look well,” Ana said. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve just caught a cold, I think, but it seems to be hitting me harder than usual this time.”

Ana pressed the back of her hand against Elisa’s forehead. Her skin was hot and clammy.

“I’m fine, it’s just a cold.”

“I think you’ve got a fever, Elisa, you should be in bed.”

“The bed’s under the window and there’s a draught. I’m fine here.”

Elisa’s voice was weak and she leant back against the arm of the chair as she spoke. Another cough followed her words and it lasted for a few minutes, the spasm racking her whole body.

“Right, Elisa, this is what we’ll do. I’ll move the bed over here and make it up with fresh sheets, and we’ll put you into bed. Then I’ll make you a nice bowl of soup, and you can eat that in bed. How does that sound?”

“I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“Nonsense, you’ve been looking after people your whole life. Let me look after you now.”

Elisa nodded and closed her eyes. Ana pulled back the curtains and looked at the bed. It was big and looked heavy. She crouched down, hooked her fingers under the edge and leant backwards, pulling with all her strength. After a minute or so, the bed moved, but only an inch. Ana wasn’t expecting the sudden give and fell backwards, banging her elbow off the wooden floor.

“Carroña!” she exclaimed. Elisa began laughing behind her and Ana turned around, a mock-indignant expression on her face. “That’s right, you sit there and laugh while I break my bones trying to move this bed!” She rubbed her elbow and got back up. Deciding that it would be easier to move the bed in parts, she stripped the bedding, noticing in the process how dirty it was. The sheets had a sheen of grease and she tried to touch only the cleaner edges as she pulled them off the bed. She was surprised by the state of them. Elisa had always been very house-proud. The dishes, no matter how chipped and battered, were always clean, and the room swept and tidy. Perhaps she was too old to do heavy housework, lifting and scrubbing and hanging out heavy, damp sheets. Ana dragged the mattress off the bed and, with difficulty, stood it up against the wall. Then she crouched down and pulled again. This time, the bed moved more easily, and it only took her a few minutes, pushing and pulling, to

drag it over to the stove. The layer of dust under the bed was raised in a cloud by the legs of the bed, and Elisa began to cough again.

“Sorry, Elisa, sorry. Let me open this window.”

As she struggled with the catch, she noticed that the glass was thick with grime. When she had pulled the mattress over and put it back on the bed again, she went upstairs for a set of clean sheets. Elisa protested.

“But those sheets are fine.” Ana could see the embarrassment in her face, and so she said, “I know, but it’s so nice to get into a freshly changed bed, especially if you’re sick. It’s no trouble, really.”

As she walked back down the stairs with the clean sheets in her arms, she thought about the patina of dirt on Elisa’s bedclothes and shook her head. She should have offered Elisa help long before.

Over the next two days Ana threw herself into housework. Elisa protested but Ana was doing it for herself more than for Elisa. She needed a distraction and so she washed and scrubbed and wiped and tidied and swept, as Elisa watched from the bed. Her initial protests soon died away and after a while she actually began directing the proceedings, alternating between giving Ana instructions and telling her stories about her youth. Despite the fact that Elisa was weaker than she pretended, Ana suspected she was enjoying herself hugely, and let her talk as she cleaned. She scrubbed the floors, the cloth warm and soft under her hands, and cleaned the windows, polishing them with handfuls of newspaper dipped in diluted vinegar. She took the worn rug out to the balcony and beat it with an old shoe, a scarf tied over her hair to protect it from the dust while Elisa called instructions through from the inner room. She washed every dish in the cupboard, and cleaned out the cupboards too. She wiped down the walls and washed all Elisa’s sheets and clothes in an enormous basin that she found in the bedroom, amid the piles of old clothes and odd bits and pieces, hanging them out on both Elisa’s balcony and her own. She cleaned out the bedroom on the second day, bringing things through to Elisa and letting her decide whether to throw them away or keep them.

“It seems a terrible waste, nina, to be throwing all these things away, especially when times are so hard.”

“Well, what I’ll do is take them to San Lorenzo, and then the nuns can give them to people who’ll use them.”

She packed the clothes into two old suitcases and told Elisa she’d be back soon. San Lorenzo wasn’t far, just on the other side of the river, but the suitcases were heavy, the

handles cutting into the flesh of her fingers. After a couple of streets they seemed twice as heavy as before. She stopped to rest as she was crossing the bridge. She could see the dome of San Lorenzo but suddenly she was filled with resentment. It was stupid to break her back carrying cast-offs to nuns who would probably give them to the orphans of Fascists. Why should she? She hesitated for only a moment, and then, using all her strength, she picked up the suitcases and began to swing them, back and forth. She waited until she'd built up some momentum, and then, in one fluid motion, she swung them up and over the railing, letting go at just the right moment so they sailed through the air instead of dropping like stones. As they fell, one suitcase opened, and clothes ballooned out of it. Ana laughed with exhilaration as old shirts, faded dresses, worn trousers floated down to the water. But when the clothes hit the water they floated, instead of sinking. One of the shirts and a pair of trousers came together in such a way so that they looked like a body, floating face down, drifting away in the water. Ana shivered and started walking back.

After three days of hard work the two rooms of the apartment were sparkling. Tears stood in Elisa's eyes as she thanked Ana.

"Don't be silly, Elisa, it was no trouble at all. Now, there's only one thing left to clean in this apartment...you!"

"Me? I washed myself the other day."

"I don't mean washing yourself standing up in a bucket. I mean washing yourself the way royalty do, in a bath!"

"A bath? I'm not leaving my house just to take a bath, have you gone mad girl?"

Ana smiled, hands on hips. "You won't have to leave your house – I'll bring the bath to you!"

Elisa grinned. "Ah, Frasco's famous tin bath, I'd forgotten about that. Do you know the whole street was talking about that for a week! And now you're as cracked as he is! Well, why not, I'll try anything once."

Ana carried the enormous tin bath down to Elisa's apartment and placed it in front of the stove. Then, just as Frasco had done, she knocked on every door in the building, asking the neighbours to heat a pot of water. Some grumbled because of the lack of coal but Ana was well liked in the building, and Elisa, of course, was an institution, and when Ana explained they all consented. Elisa was sitting on the edge of the bed in her nightdress when Ana carried in the last pot of water.

“Now, I’ll help you in, and then I’ll wash your hair if you like, but if you’re embarrassed then I’ll go through to the balcony and do some sewing, and you can call me when you’re ready to come out.”

“I’m not caring, unless you are.”

“Do you know how many actresses and actors I’ve seen in their underwear? They’re just bodies, we’ve all got one.”

“Va bien.”

When Elisa took off her nightgown to step into the bath, Ana was shocked at how thin she was. Elisa had always been small and round but now her skin hung in sagging folds from her bones. She looked like an emaciated, wrinkled child, and in the steam her breathing was ragged and hoarse.

“Oh, the water’s so lovely and warm, nina!”

Ana lifted one of Elisa’s arms, dipping a sponge in the water and squeezing it over her shoulder. The water was soft, and Elisa’s skin seemed as thin as silk. She washed her arms and legs, her shoulders and back, and left Elisa to wash her torso and between her legs herself. Then Ana scooped a handful of water up and over her hair, once, twice. Elisa’s hair was thin, and didn’t need much water to soak it. Ana took the soap between her hands and lathered it up, until her hands were full of white foam. She rubbed it gently into Elisa’s hair, pulling it up on top of her head, working the soap through it, careful to hold her hand against Elisa’s forehead so the soap wouldn’t run down into her eyes. As Ana washed her, she couldn’t help but notice how diminished Elisa seemed, an impression that had grown stronger and stronger over the last two days. It was as if she were slowly disappearing. Her hands were translucent when she held them up to the lamp, the bones showing against the light. Delicate networks of blue veins showed at her temples, her wrists, under her collarbones, branching out under her wrinkled skin.

When the water started to cool Ana helped Elisa up and passed her the towel which had been warming on the dark iron door of the stove. Elisa got into bed and lay back against the pillows with a sigh of pleasure.

“Gracias, nina. You’ve been so good to me over the last few days.”

“Well, it’s about time you let somebody look after you – you’re always too busy looking after everybody else! I’m worried about that cough, though. It hasn’t cleared up at all, in fact I think it’s worse. Maybe I should ask the doctor to come.”

“No doctors!” Elisa’s voice was surprisingly firm. “I don’t want any doctors in here. Charlatans, the lot of them.”



“Are you sure?”

“I haven’t been right since last winter, nína. I’m tired now. I know my own body, and I know that a doctor won’t make the slightest bit of difference apart from annoying me and bustling about the place.”

“Well,” Ana said, “if you’re positive you don’t want a doctor, then all right.”

Ana picked up the damp towel and took it out on to the balcony, hanging it over the railing. The leaves from her trailing vine on her own balcony, directly above, brushed the top of her head as she leant over the side. She went back inside and began chopping onions in preparation for the dinner. “I was going to make potato and onion stew tonight, Elisa. Do you fancy that?”

“I’m not too hungry, but that sounds nice. I’ll maybe have a bite of it later.”

“That’s fine.”

There was a moment of silence and then Elisa spoke again.

“You’ll be a great mother, Ana, when you have your children. When Frasco comes back from the war.”

The mention of Frasco brought the captain to her mind. A band of tension tightened across her chest and panic closed her throat, but she forced it down and made herself speak normally as she said, “Well, I’ll have to have children now, at least a daughter, anyway. I promised my mother.”

“You saw your mother?” Elisa knew all about the friction between Ana and the rest of her family, and Ana explained Isabella’s visit and everything that had happened.

“Real pearls, eh? Tell me, is it true that they glow with the heat of your skin?”

“Wait and I’ll find them, and show you.”

Ana ran upstairs to her apartment and found the small drawstring bag that contained the necklace. She went back downstairs and tipped the bag over her palm, the pearls sliding out with a soft series of clicks.

Elisa shrugged. “They don’t look like they’re glowing to me.”

“You need to wear them for a while. Here, put them on me and I’ll wear them inside my dress while I’m cooking dinner, and then we’ll see if it’s worked after we’ve eaten.”

Elisa fastened the catch and Ana let them slide down inside the collar of her dress, the milky stones cool against her skin, curving from the underside of one collarbone to another and then back up against the sides of her throat. As she chopped and sliced and stirred, she was aware of the heat of her skin entering each pearl. She remembered the times, as a child, when her mother had had occasion to wear the pearls and she’d fasten them round Ana’s neck

until the evening, when Ana would help her get ready. She'd always brushed her mother's hair and helped her choose her clothes, and then, with a carefulness that bordered on reverence, she'd fasten the pearls round her mother's neck, and sit back to admire the glow they'd taken from her own skin, like a string of tiny moons. But after dinner when she took the pearls off, they weren't glowing as she'd expected, despite sitting warm in her palm.

"They're not glowing," she said, her voice flat and disappointed.

"Yes they are," said Elisa, smiling with pleasure. "Can't you see them glowing?"

Ana turned her face away. Two days until her next meeting with the captain and she was no closer to finding hands that had truly touched. She was determined to find something. She'd been tricked the last time, but she wouldn't let him do it again. She wouldn't let him take her hands, or anything else, away from her again.

Jarama, April 1937

Usually they played Scots against English, and a couple of times Spaniards against Brits, but this time they were playing socialists against communists, just to mix up the teams a bit. Michael and Johnny were on the same side, Charlie was playing for the Communists. They'd stood in two separate huddles while Arthur, who'd said he was too old to play, laid out the goalposts, four jackets on the ground in a heap. The other men in the company were sitting in the shade of the olive trees that grew a little further up the field, smoking and talking, taking bets on the match.

"What kind of a size of field is that?" Johnny called over to him. Arthur glared. Michael knew he didn't like Johnny, he'd told Michael so one night when he'd been in his cups. Michael had said nothing. He was loyal to Johnny, but didn't want to offend Arthur.

"Why don't you keep your fucking mouth shut, Hay? I don't hear anyone else complaining."

"Just cause your old legs wouldn't carry you from one end of a postage stamp to the other doesn't mean we should have to play on a pitch the size of one!"

Arthur's face turned red and he stalked off towards the dugout. Michael elbowed Johnny. "Stop winding him up, will you?"

Johnny grinned. "It's not my fault if the old biddy can't take it."

"Aye, well."

Harry got up and spread the goalposts out a bit as the players pulled their shirts over their heads, dropping them in a heap by the sidelines. When the whistle blew the players scattered out across the field, the grass coarse and dry underfoot, browned by the sun, just like them. Peter, who was refereeing, kicked the ball out into the field and Johnny took possession at once, dribbling the ball down the side towards the goal. Charlie was playing defence for the Communists and came in for a tackle but Johnny skipped around him and he sprawled out in the grass.

"No luck Charlie," Michael called as Charlie scrambled up and after Johnny, who'd booted the ball in a long clean curve towards the goals. Eddie caught it in both hands. Half of the company started cheering while the other half groaned.

"Bollocks," shouted Johnny as Eddie sent the ball soaring up the field towards Bill. Michael set off after him, catching him up just before the goal. He slid into a tackle which took Bill's legs from under him. Bill went down with a grunt and Michael kicked the ball back up the field to a chorus of boos.

“Foul!” shouted Charlie. Bill was rolling about on the ground clutching his leg in a parody of injury.

“Foul my arse. Good work Mickey!” shouted Johnny.

“Referee?” called Eddie, but Peter shook his head.

“Play on!”

There was a brief interruption when a stray dog ran off with Eddie’s shirt, and after that had been retrieved a crowd of children from the nearest village descended on them, invaded the pitch despite the best efforts of Peter to keep them on the sidelines, and then ran off through the trees with the ball. Johnny tried to chase them for a bit, growling like a monster, but eventually he collapsed into a panting heap on the grass and their screams of delighted terror faded into the distance towards the village, leaving the final score at four three to the communists. Charlie and Michael were standing together passing a canteen back and forth between them, taking long swigs of the brackish water.

“Good game,” said Michael, pouring a little of the water into the palm of his hand and wiping it over his face. It was cold against the heat of his skin, drops of water dripping from his chin and running in cool lines down his bare chest. His hand came away filthy, a mixture of water and dirt, and he passed the canteen back to Charlie.

“It was that,” said Charlie.

“How does it feel to be on the winning team for once?” said Johnny, coming over and clapping Charlie on the back, his face grimy with sweat and dust. “Here, give us a swig of that, I’m fucking parched. That was a good goal by the way.”

Charlie beamed. “Thanks Johnny. What can I say, the better team won.”

“Nah, it’s just that Stalin’s boys are better organised, eh Mickey?”

“You’re not far wrong there,” said Michael, pulling his shirt over his head. “It’d be much simpler if this war could be decided with a game of football.”

Charlie’s face darkened. “It wouldn’t really be a fair game, would it? The Non Intervention committee refereeing, and Hitler and Mussolini in on Franco’s side?”

Johnny grinned. “Aye but they wouldn’t have Johnny Hay, star striker of Shettleston, and Charlie Reid, pride of the miners, on their side, would they? Not forgetting Mickey, of course, the terror of the Gorbals – did you see that tackle at the start?”

“It was a good one, right enough.”

“Well that was some goal you scored,” said Michael. “We’ll need to get you on our team next time, right Johnny?”

“Aye.”

Michael heard the faint hum of a plane in the blue sky. For a moment he thought nothing of it. And then came the explosion, barely half a mile away, caused no doubt by some German pilot who realised he still had a bomb left over on his way back from Madrid and didn't want to miss an opportunity.

There was a moment of shocked silence after the initial blast.

“Jesus Christ,” said Johnny, his face suddenly white under the grime. “Those weans.”

Michael thought of the children who'd made off with the ball, their voices like the sound of a flock of birds, all scrawny brown legs and black eyes, and his stomach churned. They'd all set off at a run for the village and when they got there they discovered that four houses had been hit. There were children crying in the streets, old men shaking their fists at the sky and women howling and tearing at the rubble with their hands. The Brigadiers set to helping. Michael had been the one who'd uncovered the hand of the old woman, the fingers curled up, blood gathered in the lines of her palm and around her fingernails. Slowly, slowly, they'd lifted the stones and beams away from her. She was covered in dust, the powder filling in the lines of her face and making her look younger than she was. When they carried her to the street a young woman flung herself on the body. He couldn't bear the sound of her wailing, he turned away and saw an old man with a child in his lap. They were both covered in blood, it was difficult to see who it was that had been injured, but then the old man rocked forward and Michael saw that the little boy's legs were gone. He stood and stared until Johnny's voice cut into his consciousness.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Michael gestured helplessly at the scene in front of them.

“Standing there staring is doing fuck all to help. Get over and help with the clearing of that second house.”

He'd turned obediently, gone over to help, but the images wouldn't leave his mind; the curled up hand creased with blood, the place where the child's legs used to be, the expression on the grandfather's face.

He'd seen them before his eyes when he went to bed last night, they'd been with him all day today, and now, out on night watch, there was nothing to distract him. It was a clear night, the moon full and hanging low in the sky, a bomber's moon. Its light glittered off the black water of the river that snaked through the basin of the valley far below them. He tipped his head back and looked at the stars through the leaves of the tree. They seemed much

brighter here than he'd ever seen them in Glasgow, and the longer he looked, the more stars he could see, stretching back into the sky in layers, and the more insignificant he felt. He wondered how many more deaths he'd see before he was back home, and he shivered and looked down again. He lifted his jacket, checking the pockets for his cigarettes, then leant back against the tree trunk and patted the pockets of his trousers. Nothing, he must have left them back in the dugout.

"Charlie, can you tap us a smoke?"

"No bother, here you go," said Charlie, tossing over his packet before turning back to the letter he'd been writing for the last hour.

Michael pulled open his jacket and struck a match, carefully shielding the flaring flame with his collar. He didn't want to provide a target for any snipers. He drew in a deep lungful of smoke but it was sharp as needles and provoked a coughing fit. Charlie looked up.

"These Spanish cigarettes are shite, eh?"

"You're telling me," Michael said, eyes watering as he threw the packet back over to Charlie. He took a second draw, more shallow than the first, cupping his hand around his cigarette so the glowing tip couldn't be seen. The smoke floated upwards through the papery leaves of the olive tree at his back. The air was very still, carrying the faint hum of voices, too far away to tell what language was being spoken, and sometimes the distant pop of a gunshot through the rustling sounds of the country at night.

"Are you writing a book or something? You've been at that for ages."

Charlie was stretched out on the ground, away from the shadow of the trees, squinting at the page in the moonlight.

"I'm writing to Gwennie," he said, frowning at the page, "but I can't see a bloody thing."

"How did you meet her?" asked Michael.

"She's a friend of my cousin Joan's," Charlie said.

Michael sighed. He'd been hoping for a bit of a story. "This night duty's a killer," he said, taking a last draw on his cigarette before carefully crushing the dout into the ground next to him.

"Too fucking right," said Charlie, looking round. "You bored? Do you want a bit of paper? You could write to your French woman."

Michael looked at him, frowning, and Charlie grinned.

"The one that was on the train? We all wondered where you'd got to that night."

“She’s not French. And you should mind your own business,” said Michael, but he knew that he sounded more annoyed than he felt. Even though the training at Madrigueras and life on the front had kept him busy, he’d thought of Leila often in the last four months.

“Alright boys, what’s the craic?” Johnny’s voice broke into his thoughts and Michael looked up to see him strolling through the trees, his cap pulled to one side, the badge glinting in the darkness. He took one of his hands out of his pockets and tossed Michael something, but it was dark and the object fell past his outstretched hand, landing next to his leg. His cigarettes.

“Thought you’d be missing them out on night duty.”

“Aye, and how many did you smoke on the way up here?”

“Only one...or two.”

“Chancer,” Michael muttered, but he was glad Johnny had come up, someone to talk to. Johnny sat down across from Michael, his back against a tree, legs stretched out, and lit a cigarette.

Charlie folded up his letter and tucked it away in the inside pocket of his jacket before sitting up and crawling over to where they were sitting.

“Why are you crawling about on all fours?” Johnny asked.

“We’re not that far from the Fascist line,” said Charlie. “You’d do well to remember that before lighting up.”

“Better safe than sorry, I suppose,” said Michael, tapping a cigarette out of the packet and lighting it inside his jacket again.

“What’s going back at the dugout?”

“Fuck all. Arthur’s giving a lecture about the effects of the trade unions on post war industry.”

“Hmm, sounds quite interesting,” said Charlie. “Improved it, I would say. We had a couple of stay in strikes last year.”

“What were you striking for?”

“Better conditions, mainly,” said Charlie. “Twelve of the lads were killed in accidents over two months.”

“Jesus!”

“It could all have been prevented, too,” said Charlie. “Just carelessness on the part of the company and not enough care for their workers.”

“How long were you in for?”

“Almost two weeks. It’s not bad when you’re down for your shift, it’s only ten hours underground, but two weeks was long. I started feeling the weight of the ground above us. I couldn’t remember what natural light looked like any more. It’s hard to describe what it’s like if you’ve never been down the pit. All darkness and dust, low ceilings and narrow tunnels, no space, anywhere.”

“Sounds like hell,” said Johnny.

“But we won,” said Charlie, his face brightening at the memory. “It’s bargaining power that’s important, that’s the point of a union.”

“I was in a union when I worked at the bevellers,” said Michael. “We went out on strike when they said they’d be lowering the wages. But it did no good. They just laid off the ones that went out on strike, saved their money that way. The thing I really hold against the bastards was that I couldn’t get another job after that. Must have been put on some sort of blacklist or something. I walked the streets for two years, looking for work. I asked everywhere but nowhere was looking. At least, that’s what they said. I always seemed to end up at the Green, listening to the speeches. That’s when I got into the politics.” It had provided a refuge for him against the rage and shame of his unemployment. After a day of walking the streets with nothing but refusals and apologetic shrugs, it was a consolation to hear that it wasn’t his fault but the fault of the government, of capitalism. There was a sense of solidarity among the crowd that Michael missed from the workshop. Maybe it was the idea of that solidarity that had seduced him over to Spain, more than the idea of fighting fascism. Here he felt that he was part of something, that he was doing something important. But he hadn’t been prepared for what he’d seen yesterday.

“My da was a big union man,” said Charlie. “He was a Communist his whole life. We were raised on it.”

“I was never that into politics,” said Johnny.

“Strange,” said Charlie, “for someone who’s come over to fight for a political ideal!”

Michael nodded. “I have to say, if I’d been working, I wouldn’t have heard all those speeches, and if I hadn’t heard all the speeches, I wouldn’t have started reading the Daily Worker, and if I hadn’t started reading the Daily Worker, I wouldn’t be here now, probably.”

“So if they hadn’t tried to cut the wages you’d be sitting in the glassworks right now?”

“Not right now, no,” said Michael. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s Friday night,” said Johnny, a faraway look on his face. “You’d maybe be out at the dancing...”



“This is more important,” said Charlie.

“Besides, we’ve the rest of our lives to go dancing,” said Johnny.

The pause that followed was filled with the sounds of the countryside. There was a faint, chirruping noise, and leaves rustling, the distant sound of water. Glasgow on a Friday night seemed unimaginably far away.

“Anyhow the craic was shite down there,” said Johnny, “so I thought I’d take a wander up here, see what yous were up to.”

“Nothing much,” said Michael. “Charlie’s been writing his sweetheart.”

“Oh aye?” said Johnny. “Show us what you’ve been writing then.”

“Will I fuck,” said Charlie. A cloud had covered the moon and it was suddenly very dark, too dark for Michael to make out his expression, but his voice was good humoured.

“I can hardly see my hand in front of my face,” said Johnny.

“It’s more of this that we need,” said Charlie. “Clear nights make it too easy for the bombers.”

“They’ve been going out in the early mornings,” said Michael. He’d heard them that morning around five, droning overhead before the noise faded away in the direction of Madrid. “They make some racket.”

The three of them sat in silence for a moment.

“I heard a rumour that we’ll be moving out soon,” said Johnny.

“Really?” asked Charlie. “Going where? Who told you?”

“Eddie said something about it. You know how cryptic he always is but. Loves knowing something the rest of us don’t.”

“What did he say?” asked Michael.

“Apparently they’re planning a big offensive against the rebels, but he’s not heard where yet.”

“Heard from who?”

“Who knows, he’d never say.”

“So we’ll get to be in an actual battle?” said Charlie, his face lit up with enthusiasm. Michael had less stomach for it after yesterday’s events but he said nothing.

“Aye Charlie,” said Johnny, lighting another cigarette, “you’ll get to kill some Fascists yet.”

A couple of days later they’d been put to digging a communications trench. They’d been at it for a couple of hours and the sweat was streaming off Michael’s back as he pushed

the spade into the ground and shovelled up another spadeful of soil, the muscles across his shoulders aching with the motion. Johnny was next to him and they worked in silence, breathing deeply with the effort, shovelling the earth off to the side where it was gathering in a heap. Charlie was on the other side, scooping the loose earth into the back of a truck, and up ahead there were groups doing the same. The only sounds were the scraping of the shovels, the grunting of the men, the loose rattle of soil and stones, when Michael heard the music. He straightened up and looked around but he couldn't see where it was coming from.

"No slacking, Mickey," said Johnny. "We'd better get a double ration of wine with our dinner after this."

"Can't you hear it?" said Michael. Charlie had put down his shovel too and so had many of the other men, straightening up and looking around with puzzled expressions.

"Where's it coming from?" asked Charlie.

Michael pointed down the road. A truck with an enormous speaker on top had just come into view. It was the People's Wagon, it passed every now and then along the front line, playing recordings of speeches in Spanish and English and French by famous socialist and communist leaders. You'd only catch a few sentences as it went by. It had never played music before. The song was one that Michael didn't know, though he recognised the rhythm as a waltz. Johnny picked up his shovel and held one of his arms around it, stepping from one side to the other as though he was in a dancehall, and Charlie started laughing. Just as the truck passed them, there was a bang and it swerved off to the side of the road. The music jumped but then kept playing. A man in a soldier's uniform with dark hair jumped lightly out of the side of the truck and checked the wheel, throwing his hands up in exasperation. Eddie, who spoke a little Spanish, went over to investigate and Michael followed. When he reached the truck the music was deafening, and Eddie and the Spanish soldier were yelling over it.

"What's going on?" shouted Michael.

"They've got a puncture," Eddie shouted back. The soldier lifted up his shoulders in an expressive shrug and smiled at Michael.

"No, I mean what's going on with the music?" shouted Michael.

"I don't know."

The volume was lowered and another man leant out of the driver's window, speaking in rapid Spanish to the soldier before opening his own door and jumping down on to the ground.

"Hola," said Michael, holding out his hand. The soldier shook it.

"Hello," he said. "International Brigades, sí?"

Michael nodded.

“English?”

“No, Scottish. From Scotland.”

“Ah, escocés,” the soldier said, grinning.

“What is happening here?” asked Michael. “The music?”

“La musica...we take camion for to play.”

“But why?” asked Michael.

“Eh...no fighting,” he said, “we aburrido.”

“Aburrito?” said Michael.

“Bored,” translated Eddie, who was helping the other soldier winch up the truck.

“Roll us over that tyre, will you? They found some old records in an abandoned house and stole the truck.”

“They stole the truck?” said Michael as he went round to the back and pulled out the spare tyre. Inside a record was turning on a wind up gramophone, trembling under the needle, and other albums were spilled across the floor. The soldier climbed up and wound up the gramophone energetically before jumping down again and lighting a cigarette.

“We want to make...un espectáculo.”

“A spectacle?” said Michael.

“Something beautiful, una cosa entretenido, para divertirse...”

Michael shook his head.

“Algo es algo.” He patted himself on the chest. “Me llamo Alejandro.”

Michael smiled and held out his hand. “Michael.”

As they shook hands Alejandro nodded over his shoulder to the other man. “Y él es Frasco.”

Frasco straightened up and grinned at Michael. “Alejandro estaba un director de teatro, antes de la guerra.”

Michael smiled and shook his head, raising his hands palm upwards in a gesture that he hoped signified his lack of comprehension.

“He’s saying that Alejandro was a theatre director, before the war,” said Eddie.

“Seems he’s still got a flair for the theatrical.”

Alejandro patted his chest and waved his arm towards the trenches before taking a bow. Michael turned to look. Under the olive trees and the leaves that shone silver and green in the sunlight, among the heaps of earth and abandoned shovels, between the waiting trucks with their rifles propped against the sides, with sweat still running down their faces and dirt

under their fingernails, the entire company was waltzing, Johnny with Charlie, Bill with Harry, Eddie with Archie, Peter with Arthur, the rest of them all paired up too, all waltzing round the trees and along the top of the trenches, pirouetting ironically, dipping each other and turning under one another's arms and laughing, their teeth white in their sun browned faces.

### The Third Meeting

It was late in the evening before Ana's next appointment with the captain. She paced up and down across the floor of her bedroom. Outside the wind sang at the shutters and the washing on the balcony danced, whipping back and forth in the small space. She was frightened of going tomorrow. Maybe she wouldn't. Plenty of other women were alone, married to absent men that they loved as much as she had loved Frasco, surely. She was sacrificing herself for a man whom she'd only known for four years and for the first time since she'd met the captain, she asked herself if he was worth it. Was she not worth more? And yet, in those two years before he left, he'd become the other half of her. She'd lose more if she lost him. Resentment flared in her chest and she clenched her fists as she strode back and forth. It would have been better if she'd never met him. He'd brought her more pain than happiness. Her nails dug into her palms but the pain only fuelled her anger. He shouldn't have left. He shouldn't have left her all alone at the start of a civil war. He should have taken her with him instead of abandoning her in such a cavalier manner. And would they be the same together if she got him back? Maybe living in the past as she'd done for the last two years, subsiding on memory and hope, had only caused her to build up an idealised picture in her head. The reality probably wouldn't correspond to her image of Frasco any more. After two years at war he would have changed. Two years alone had changed her.

The shutters rattled, the wind picked up, and the flames of the candles jumped in the draughts from under the balcony doors. The shadows in the room leapt and wavered with every breath as Ana's fury grew. She marched across to the balcony and flung the doors and shutters open, standing out at the rail, letting the wind tug at her hair and her clothes with insistent, determined fingers, trying to coax her over the side. The wind was hot, a breath of madness sweeping across her skin, pulling her, dragging at her, drawing her into its clasp. It changed direction suddenly and the clothes that had been straining at the line whipped back across her face, stinging her skin. She gripped the rail with both hands, the metal ice cold under her palms, and wondered if the wind would catch her now if she fell or jumped, if it would seize her and sweep her away, across the darkened city, over the country, wounded and bleeding and falling apart. Or perhaps it would fall away at the last moment and she would plummet three storeys to smash on to the pavement. Then the captain could take anything he wanted from her body, she would be beyond all loss, all pain.

Abruptly, the wind dropped. Ana lifted her hands from the rail and stepped backwards, inside the room. The candles had all been blown out when she opened the

balcony doors, and the bedroom was in darkness apart from the light of the lamp that came from the living space. There were clothes and sheets of paper all over the room. She moved slowly through the half-light, picking up the clothes and draping them over the end of the bed, gathering Frasco's notes into a pile. Guilt filled her as she placed them back on the desk. She would go to the captain tomorrow. Frasco would have done the same for her.

She went through to the other room and sat down in one of the chairs. She should go back down to Elisa. Over the last four days she'd become conscious of how much Elisa needed her; just as much as Ana had needed her for the last four years. She'd come into her life just as Ana had married and cut herself off from her family. It had all been pride and stubbornness, her own fault, and she'd missed the last few years of her mother's life. Ana drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Her father had been a good man and everybody he met saw it in him. His funeral was the busiest Ana had ever seen, with people standing outside the church. He'd been the parent she was closest to, from a very young age, and when he died Ana had sunk into her own grief without a thought for her mother. Yet she'd been left alone too, after thirty years of living with a man who wouldn't let the wind blow on her, he loved her so. And Ana, who thought herself so like her father, had turned her back on the woman he'd loved, just two years after his death, because her mother hadn't approved of the man Ana was marrying. What would he say to her now if he knew what she'd done? The shame of it came home to Ana now and if she could have cried, she would have.

There was a sudden squawk from the bedroom and a fluttering sound. Ana opened the door slowly, dread mounting inside her, and saw the crow, beating its wings against the walls and crashing against the furniture, a flurry of black feathers and panic, a sign. Ana turned and ran down the stairs to Elisa, but as soon as she opened the door, she knew by the quality of the silence that she'd been right. Elisa was lying in her bed next to the stove, perfectly still.

She sat by Elisa all night, holding her hands, keeping her eyes open against sleep in a vigil that was senseless, even to her. The thought of sending a message to anyone or letting the neighbours know didn't even occur to her. The hours were long and dark, passing slowly as Ana watched Elisa's transformation in death. Her skin turned moon white, almost transparent, the veins, muscles and bones visible underneath. Even her flesh felt less and less substantial in Ana's hands as the night wore on. When the sky began to pale, Ana stood up and walked across to the window. She stood there for perhaps half an hour, watching the sun slowly colour the sky. It was the day of her appointment and she had nothing for the captain. She returned to the side of the bed, and took Elisa's hand in her own. A terrible thought

flickered deep in the centre of her mind, and she pushed it down. After a few minutes it returned, but she buried it. When it surfaced again, however, she didn't have the strength to push it away for the third time, so she allowed it out and considered it in the dawn light with hopelessness and horror. Elisa's hands lay in hers, the skin of them as polished as old wood, the lines on the palms all but worn away. Ana could almost feel the sensations passing through to her own skin as she imagined how much those hands must have touched in all the years Elisa had used them.

There was no time left to find anything else. Elisa was dead. This was not a betrayal. Ana repeated these three sentences to herself, over and over again, as she got up from the bed, as she searched through Elisa's cupboards for something to use, as she returned to the bed, a knife in one hand and a wooden chopping board in the other. She turned the serrated blade over in her hand, the metal cool against her skin. She lifted Elisa's left hand and placed it on the board, and pressed the knife against Elisa's wrist. She stood with two hands on the metal handle, and that moment of hesitation seemed to last an eternity, her past and future hanging suspended in the balance. There was no time left to find anything else. Elisa was dead. This was not a betrayal. She slid the knife forward and pressed down.

The first cut was the most difficult but there was surprisingly little blood, just a black trickle that pooled beneath the hand. The bones proved difficult to saw through, so Ana positioned the knife again and then pressed down on it with all her weight. There was a clean crunch, and then she sliced through the skin on the underside of the wrist. She stood and looked what she'd done for a moment. The blood on her knuckles was cold and dark. When she lifted up the board, the stump of the arm fell back down on to the bed and as she looked at the hand Ana suddenly and inexplicably wanted to laugh. It looked so surreal, sitting there detached from the body like something from a painting. The right hand was almost easy to do. But when Ana picked the two hands up from the bed the texture and temperature of the skin, the raw, glistening stumps of the wrists, the blood trickling slowly through her fingers, brought home the horror of what she'd done. She dropped them and vomited into the chamberpot. She hadn't eaten since the afternoon of the day before and nothing came up but a thin stream of bile. Wiping her mouth with her hand, she slowly got to her feet again. She'd had no time to find anything else. Elisa was dead. This was not a betrayal.

She picked up Elisa's shawl from the end of the bed, and wrapped the hands in it, lovingly, as if she were wrapping a present. She went back upstairs to put on her boots. There was no sign of the bird, it must have flown back out the balcony doors. She shut and locked them, and then turned around. She'd been trying to avoid mirrors since her last visit to the

captain, afraid of what she might see, but now she pulled the material away from the glass. She wanted to see if what she'd done would show in her face. There was a smear of black blood across her mouth, but even when she wiped it away the woman in the reflection was a stranger.

Ana walked through the streets with the parcel clutched to her chest, as if it were a baby. Her steps were slow and passing strangers looked at her with concern. The sleepless night was beginning to take its toll; everything felt slightly unreal, as though she were a character on stage at the theatre. The streets looked like a set, the sunlight was bright and yet without warmth, and she half expected to see the eyes of an audience in the shadows. The edges of her vision flickered and blurred and the sounds of the awakening city seemed to come to her from a great distance. She climbed the steps of the military building. When she stopped at the reception the girl behind the desk stared at her.

“How can I help you Senora?”

“I’ve been here twice in the last two weeks,” Ana snapped. “You know who I am, and who I’m here to see.”

The girl’s eyes hardened. “There are many women who come to see the Captain, Senora. If you give me your name, I will check the records.”

“Ana Valladares. My name is Ana Valladares.”

The girl checked through the ledger in front of her.

“Follow me.”

Ana was again shown upstairs, along the dark, wood panelled hallway. The door opened and the secretary left her. Ana looked after her, walking quickly along the hallway, her heels clicking on the tiled floor. She stepped inside the room. The captain rose slightly as she entered and gestured towards the chair in front of his desk.

“Have a seat, Senora.”

But Ana strode across the room and slammed the parcel down on the desk in front of him. There were glistening patches where Elisa’s blood had soaked through the shawl. The captain glanced at Ana and, following his gaze, she realised that the blood had seeped on to her dress, dark red against the blue. She placed her hands on his desk and leant forward, staring into his eyes, her voice hard.

“I have brought you hands that have truly touched. What is the final task?”

The captain smiled. He reached out his hand and placed it on top of the bundle, drawing it to him slowly.



“Hands that have truly touched,” he said in a musing tone, as he lifted each fold of the shawl away, until Elisa’s hands were revealed. They were lying in such a way that the fingers of each hand curled round the other. The skin was a greyish hue, and there was blood under the nails and in the crease between palm and fingers. Ana averted her eyes and dropped into the chair, feeling suddenly ill. The captain stood up, smiling, and lifted one of Elisa’s hands. He walked round to Ana’s side of the desk, and leant his weight against the edge, just as he had the first time, and the second. His movements seemed ritualistic. Ana felt as if she was trapped in an unending nightmare, a choreographed sequence of movement that turned in a circle, where her emotions veered between anger and fear. She raised her eyes to his and although their blackness no longer chilled her, she knew in that instant that Elisa’s hands would not be enough.

“I asked you, Ana, to bring me hands that have truly touched...and you bring me these lumps of dead flesh.”

“Is it not enough?”

“Did you think it would be, Ana? Did you think it would be enough?” He dropped the hand into Ana’s lap where it landed with a soft thump on her thighs.

“If you knew what it cost me, you would know that it was enough.”

The captain leant down towards her and gripped her shoulders. She could feel the strength and power in his hands, his fingers digging into her flesh. She turned her face away.

“You’re going to take my hands.” It wasn’t a question and he didn’t reply. She held her hands out, palm up, the soft inner part of her wrists exposed and vulnerable. He released her shoulders and leant back, taking one of her hands in his and turning it over, caressing the back of her hand with the side of his thumb. Again Ana saw the hunger on his face.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because this is what I do,” he replied. Their faces were very close together.

“Why?”

“Because I can.”

Holding her gaze, he gripped Ana’s shoulders again and stood up, lifting her with him. She leant back against his shoulder, feeling the weight of his body, his strong arm around her, his hand on her throat, and Ana closed her eyes and drifted away on a sea of darkness. She knew she wouldn’t fall, safe in the captain’s arms.

Voices and images came confusedly to her mind, but eventually they settled into one night, one room, part dream and part memory. Frasco, playing guitar as she lay on the bed, her back

to him. She was facing the balcony doors, which were open, and looking at the lights of the city spread out below her and glittering in the night. They'd been married six months or so, and that day had been the day of their first serious argument. Jacinto had come up to wardrobe that afternoon. His jacket had ripped during the matinee performance and he needed it mended for the show that night. After she had sewn it up, she'd put it on him to make sure that the line of the cloth wasn't spoiled. She was fastening the buttons when the corners of Jacinto's mouth twisted upwards in a smile and Ana looked round to see Frasco in the doorway, his face darkened with anger.

"It's fine, Jacinto. If there's any other problem with your costume tonight, just bring it back tomorrow."

"Gracias Ana," Jacinto said. Frasco stood, unmoving, in the doorway, and Jacinto was forced to squeeze past him. He looked at her over Frasco's shoulder and grinned. "See you later, bella."

Frasco stepped inside the doorway and slammed the door behind him in one swift movement.

"Seeing him later, are you?"

"He came up to get his jacket fixed, Frasco."

"Well it looked very cosy to me."

"I can't stop doing my job because you feel threatened by Jacinto."

"I'm not threatened by that fool. Why would I be threatened by him?" His voice was loud and Ana hoped that nobody was in the corridor outside. Gossip travelled fast in the theatre.

"If you're not threatened then why are you acting like an idiot?"

"Can't he button his own jacket?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"I'm not stupid, Ana. I've seen the way he looks at you."

"Well what has that to do with me? I can't stop him from looking, can I?"

Frasco slammed the side of his fist into the wall beside the door. "You don't have to put yourself there for him to look at!" he shouted.

"Why are you so angry?"

He glared at her but didn't reply.

"This is where I work, Frasco." She gestured round the room. "What am I supposed to do, hide in a cupboard when Jacinto comes in?"

"Well how do I know why he's here?"

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means.”

There was a pause in which they looked at one another across the room.

“I ended my relationship with Jacinto the day after I met you, Frasco,” Ana said evenly, “and now I’m married to you. Jacinto came up to ask me to mend his jacket, that’s all.”

“He was married when you were together.”

“You know how bad I felt about that.”

“Well it didn’t stop you.”

“It was a mistake, Frasco. I can’t change the past, and I can’t keep apologising for something I can’t change.”

He held her gaze, his face flushed with anger. “I’ve told you I don’t want you to see him anymore,” he said stubbornly.

“We both work here.” Ana shouted. “How can I avoid it?”

“Well maybe you should leave.”

“What? I’m not going anywhere. If you’re the one with the problem, you leave. I was here first.”

“I’m the one who writes the plays.”

“And your art is irreplaceable, I suppose? Don’t be so arrogant!”

“You know what I’m saying.”

“It’s over, Frasco. It’s been over for a year and a half. How many more times do I need to tell you? He works here, just as I do, and if you can’t bear for us to be in the same building, that’s your problem. I’m not leaving my job because of your jealousy.”

“I’m sure they’ll find someone else to sleep with the actors.”

She stared at him for a minute, shocked, and then turned her back on him. “Get out.”

Frasco turned the handle and went out, slamming the door behind him. Ana kicked the closed door as hard as she could.

She’d been too angry to do any work for the rest of the afternoon and had left early, walking home with quick, furious steps. The apartment was empty when she arrived, and after an hour of pacing up and down, Frasco’s words running over and over in her mind, she’d lain down on the bed and fallen asleep, exhausted by her anger. The notes of a guitar filtered through her dreams, and when she woke she realised that Frasco was sitting on a chair behind her, playing her favourite song. She kept her face turned to the window but the fire had gone out of her anger. A series of liquid notes rippled from the guitar as the organza

curtains billowed out in the breeze. The soft material brushed over her face and arms and she shivered. The music stopped and she felt the bed move as Frasco sat on it. He lay down behind her, fitting his body to hers, his chest against her back, the front of his thighs against the back of hers, the front of his feet against the soles of her feet.

“I’m sorry, querida mia. You’re right, I am an idiot.” Ana didn’t reply, and he placed a tentative hand on the curve of her waist. “Are you still angry with me?”

“You said some horrible things to me.”

“I didn’t mean them.”

“You still said them.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

There was a pause. Ana knew that she’d forgive him. Her anger slid away from her with that one touch. She reached across her stomach and curled her fingertips under his. But a hand fell down on to hers, and it wasn’t Frasco’s hand, but Elisa’s, cold and greying, bloodied and clammy. When Ana opened her eyes, she wasn’t in her bedroom at all but in the same room that she’d woken in before. She sat up, blinking stupidly, and looked down at her hands. She raised them to her face, flexing her fingers, examining the lines of her palm. They seemed unchanged but so had her sight, at first. When she laid her palm on the door, pushing it open, it was confirmed, and when the door shut behind her she sat down opposite the captain.

“I’m finished,” she said, her heart beating furiously against her ribs like a trapped bird. “You won’t take anything else from me. The war will be over soon and Frasco will be back home then. I’ve waited for him for two years, I can wait a little longer. I won’t do anything else for you.”

The captain shook his head, clicking his tongue with disapproval. “That’s not how it works, Ana. We made an agreement.”

Her voice rose shrilly as she answered, “I don’t care! I won’t give you anything else. Frasco would understand.”

There was a pause. The captain brought his hands together and rested his chin on his fingertips, smiling slightly.

“Do you know, Ana, how many Republican prisoners have already been executed for treason?”

She shook her head, looking straight at him, her face anguished and tears burning the backs of her eyes.

“We made an agreement, Ana. If you break it, Frasco is the one who will pay the price.”

Ana put her hands over her face and thought of Frasco. She had heard stories of the execution squads, how they pressed the gun upwards against the nape of the neck so the brains exploded out through the front of the skull. Or else how they shot the victim in the stomach and left him to bleed to death. She thought of Frasco’s smile, his laughing eyes, his clever hands. She thought of his words, his arms, the light in his face when he looked at her, and she knew she couldn’t betray him to the captain.

“What do I have to do?” she said, her voice low with defeat.

“In seven days, Ana, you must bring me a heart-”

“A heart?”

“-that has truly loved. If you do not bring me a heart that has truly loved, you will provide it yourself. But remember, Ana, I will replace whatever I take from you. I have replaced everything I’ve taken from you so far.”

“I don’t understand how you do this,” Ana said, standing up, her voice shaking, “but you won’t take anything else from me.”

The captain smiled up at her from his chair. “I’ll see you in seven days, Ana.”

Brunete, July 1937

Michael couldn't stop his hands from shaking. It had started after he'd been woken in the darkness, after he'd dressed and collected his rifle, once the company was collected and driven in trucks to the front, once they were waiting in the pre-dawn dimness and there was nothing for his hands to do. He'd tried to light a cigarette a few minutes ago and his hands were trembling so much they shook the flame of the match out. Johnny passed him a lit cigarette and he took a drag, resting his weight against the wall. Then he straightened up, worried that his legs would be numb when the order was given and he wouldn't be able to move. Then, standing, he thought maybe his head would be visible over the top of the trench, even though it was barely light. He sat back down but his legs started shaking then, so he stood back up.

"Will you either sit or stand," said Johnny, his voice amused. "You're up and down more often than a hoor's knickers."

Michael crouched back against the trench wall. The dry soil whispered down in a soft shower between his feet. He untied his boots and then tried to tie them again, just for something to occupy his hands, but his fingers fumbled over the laces. They didn't give him blisters any more, the leather had adjusted to the shape of his feet over the last few months. It was strange to think of all the miles of Spain they'd helped him over, after years of going from Govanhill to the shipyards in Scotstoun. His da always took them off when he got home from work and left them next to the range. He'd had them for years, getting them resoled each winter by the cobblers on Ballater Street behind the old theatre.

Michael wondered what his da was wearing to work these days, what boots were sitting beside the range right now, waiting for his da to push back the door of the box bed, the long low creak of the rusty hinge waking Annie in the next room, she'd been a light sleeper since she was a babby. Nora would be wakened by Annie climbing over her to get out of the bed but she wouldn't get up to help with the breakfast, she'd lie in bed all day if his mam let her away with it. Annie would go into the kitchen and climb into the warm space left between the rumpled blankets, watching his mam put the kettle on the range for the tea. Manus would still be asleep, out last night no doubt, deep in half drunk dreams in the small bedroom, filled by the two beds corner to corner. When Michael was a child, before Edward and Kathleen got married, before Annie was born, there had been five of them in that room, Edward and Manus and him in one bed, fighting over the blanket and who got to sleep in the middle where it was warmest, elbowing and kicking each other. He'd wake up every morning with

Manus' knee in the small of his back, or Edward's elbow sticking into his neck, and he'd look over to the other bed where Nora and Kathleen would be curled up in the middle, the blanket tucked in around them, their arms and legs overlapping each others like puppies asleep in a heap. He could picture the room so clearly, the two beds corner to corner, the worn sheets, the old blankets, pillows that had long ago lost their shape, that hole in the skirting board that the mice came through before they'd stuffed it with newspaper.

He balled his shaking hands into fists and then uncurled his fingers, attempting the laces again, but he couldn't get his hands still enough to loop the leather cords round each other. He couldn't go over the top with his laces undone. He'd trip and fall, he wouldn't be able to run, to keep up with the rest of the company as they moved forward across the ground towards the village, the way they'd done in their training exercises. Maybe he'd be better taking them off altogether if he couldn't get them tied. But that was ridiculous, he couldn't go over in his stocking feet. He looked upwards and dug his fingers into the earth, screwing up fistfuls of soil in frustration. Johnny, who'd been leaning next to him, knelt down and tied them for him, his hands steady, a lit cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. Michael met his eyes but Johnny said nothing, standing back up and taking a last draw on his cigarette before tossing it to the ground and lighting another one. He'd been smoking incessantly for the last half hour and the duckboards around his feet were littered with cigarette butts, smoked down to the very end. Charlie was sitting on the other side of Michael, gripping the wooden butt of his rifle so hard his knuckles were white.

"The unity of the Republicans is the most important thing," he said, his voice higher than usual. "Those fucking anarchists have to realise that. We need to win the war first, the idea of a revolution in the middle of a war is fucking madness. Who knows how many good soldiers they killed, men we need at the front. As if Barcelona's not getting bombed enough, those fucking idiots need to start shooting the shite out of the place. I mean, come on to fuck. They're probably in the fucking pay of Franco. They're probably-"

"Charlie, gonnae shut the fuck up," said Johnny, his voice low and calm. "Your babble is going through my head."

Eddie appeared in front of them from down the line, his face pale in the grey dawn light.

"Alright Eddie," said Michael. "Any idea what the fuck's going on?"

"Time of attack's set for six. It's only twenty to now."

"Feels like we've been waiting here for ages."

Bill appeared behind him. "We were the first company brought up to the line. The trucks have been bringing the rest up for the last half hour."

"Cigarette?" said Johnny, offering him the packet.

"No, I'm alright mate," said Bill. His eyes swept the ground. "How many have you gone through? Feeling nervous? First action and all that?"

"Am I fuck," said Johnny, grinning. "But I might as well smoke it up now. I could be lying out there with a bullet through my head in half an hour. Who'll smoke them then? Waste not want not, and all that."

"Never worry, I'll smoke them," said Bill.

"You'll bring no luck to us at all talking like that," said Michael.

Johnny shrugged. "It's true but."

"Shut up will you," said Charlie. "What kind of way is that to be going on? And besides, we held them back at Jarama, we'll win the day here. We've got the numbers on our side, and the strength of conviction on our side, and-"

"Well said Charlie," said Eddie, cutting him off, and Charlie subsided into silence again. "I'm away back down the line."

"See you boys in the town, eh?" Bill said.

"Aye, I'll meet you in the pub," said Johnny. Bill grinned and nodded at Michael before vanishing back down the line.

Michael jammed his hands into his pockets, pressing them hard against his legs, and looked up at the sky. The light was still grey but the sky was clear, a very faint blue, with an edging of the palest pink in the east. It was going to be a fine day.

"This is what we're here for," said Charlie, his voice clear and steadier than it had been all morning. "This is why we came. I'm proud to die in the defence of democracy."

His words calmed Michael a little. This was why he had come to Spain, why he was crouching in a trench. It had been seven months since he'd left home. He'd got a train down through England and across France, he'd blistered his heels climbing over mountains, he'd spent weeks in the mud of Madrigueras, bruising his shoulder in learning to shoot. The long sunny days in the valley of Jarama, the nights on watch, the games of football, the political arguments and hours of patrol all led to this point, the point that really mattered. This was the moment and he would do them all proud, his family, his company, the government he was serving, the people of Spain, the working men of Europe. This was his moment.



There was a sudden blast and the trench was lit up with a flare of light, then another, and another. The sound filled his ears, filled his mind, wiping it clean, and he stood up, looking at Johnny.

“Ours, I think,” said Johnny, in a pause. “Trying to soften them up before we go over.”

“How long now?” said Charlie.”

“Another five minutes, I’d say. I’m going for a piss.”

A low whistle blew and Johnny swore, tossing away his cigarette. Michael swung his rifle up on to his shoulder and with Johnny and Charlie on either side, pulled himself up and over the top of the trench and started running. He stopped every couple of minutes to fire, crouching down and aiming at the soldiers that were flitting about in the distance, pale shadows between the buildings of the village, but it was impossible to tell if his shots were finding their mark. Bullets zipped and whistled in the air around him and the urge to fling himself down on the ground was overwhelming but he resisted it, going forward. The air was a haze of smoke and curses and he didn’t dare look down the line. He could see Charlie and Johnny to his left and right, and that was enough, he didn’t want to see any more. They went forward in a line, running low to the ground, searching out any bit of cover; a low bush, a slight rise in the ground. At the briefing last night, they’d been told that their aim was to take the village, but the map they’d been shown had gone straight out of Michael’s head. The best he could hope for was to keep going forward with the rest of the boys.

When they reached the outlying houses of the village, all seemed suddenly quiet. They crouched against a whitewashed wall and Charlie peered round the corner.

“I’ve a feeling we should be checking these houses before moving on,” whispered Johnny. “Don’t want these bastards sneaking out and shooting us in the backs, do we?” He glanced across at Peter and motioned towards the doorway of the house they were leaning against, lifting his eyebrows. Peter nodded and the three of them began creeping along, hugging the wall and taking care to keep their heads below the level of the windowsills. When they reached the doorway, Johnny straightened up and looked at Michael.

“You come with me,” he said to Michael. “Charlie, stay here and keep an eye out.”

“Nah, I’m coming in,” said Charlie.

“You’re staying here,” said Johnny, his voice authoritative, and Charlie crouched back down against the wall. Johnny and Michael stood on each side of the door. Fear and adrenalin rushed through Michael’s veins as he pictured a room full of dark faced Fascists

with their guns all pointing at the doorway, ready to blow them away. Each second that passed heightened the tension and it was a relief when Johnny quietly turned the handle and then flung the door open, edging in and sweeping the room with his gun. Michael followed him, ducking his head to get in through the low doorway. It was strange, the quiet of the house, the domesticity of the low wooden beams and whitewashed walls, the packed earth floor and the fireplace with the pot still hanging inside it from the blackened iron hook, and Johnny crossing the room in his uniform, rifle in hand, to the doorway in the corner. Michael walked across to where he stood and took up position on the other side of the doorway. He looked at Johnny, the silence vibrating between them, and on his nod, swung his rifle round and through the door as Johnny pushed it open. There was nobody in that room either, just a low iron bedstead with a couple of blankets, worn and patched, pushed to the bottom of the mattress, as if the occupant had just got up and was in the next room eating breakfast.

“Nothing here,” Johnny said, “let’s go.”

The next house was the same. They crept along the outside wall. Charlie stayed outside to cover them. Johnny opened the door and then edged inside. The inside of the house was very similar to the first, whitewashed walls, wooden table, fireplace, and a door leading to the bedroom. Their feet made no sound on the earthen floor but the sound of his own breathing roared in Michael’s ears. Johnny waited for him next to the bedroom door. Michael took up his position, rifle at the ready, as Johnny kicked the door open, but this time there was a flash of movement behind the bed, a clatter, a glimpse of the dark coloured uniform of the Nationalists and without thinking Michael fired. The sound of the shot rang against the walls, reverberating in that small space. In the silence immediately afterwards there was a gurgling, spluttering sound. The soldier was slumped back against the wall. A stream of red blood was running down his chest, the colour shocking against the faded uniform. He was holding his hands to his throat, his mouth opening and closing, his eyes wide. Michael looked at him. He couldn’t have been more than twenty. Michael could feel his legs starting to tremble and he looked at Johnny.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fuck, fuck.”

“It’s all right,” said Johnny, keeping his rifle trained on the soldier. “Check him for weapons.”

“Look at the state of him! He’s hardly going to-”

Charlie came through the door, rifle pointing straight at them.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” said Johnny. “Charlie, cover him for me, will you?”

“Hands over your head,” said Charlie. He mimed the action. “Over your head!”

When the soldier lifted his hands Michael realised that he’d shot him through the throat. Blood bubbled brightly at the hole in his neck and his head slumped to the side. Michael sat down on a chair next to the door.

“I think – I think he’s dead, Johnny,” Charlie said.

Johnny checked the body anyway. “Must have dropped his gun,” he said, holding up a rifle lying next to the bed. The three of them looked at one another.

“If it hadn’t been him, it would’ve been you,” said Johnny.

Michael nodded, swallowing.

“What do we do now?” said Charlie.

“We’ll let Peter know there might be other rebels hiding in the houses, then we keep checking,” said Johnny.

“What about...” Michael gestured towards the body.

“Leave him,” said Charlie.

“We need to keep checking the houses,” Johnny said.

He walked out of the room, ducking his head under the low doorway, and Michael and Charlie followed.

The young rebel soldier was the only fatality of the morning. He must have been left behind when the fascists retreated. They’d taken the women and children and old men that had been the remaining occupants of the village with them, a human shield. By midday they were already almost out of the reach of the company’s guns but the thin wailing of a baby could still be heard on the wind. Peter spat on the ground. “Cowards,” he said, his voice tight. “Right, I want half of yous to follow these bastards as far as you can. The other half secure the village, find us billets for tonight and try to scare up some food.”

A couple of hours later they were lying on top of a ridge among some olive trees, watching the rebels dig in some distance away. Peter had told them to hold their fire as long as the women and children were still with them, but now they’d moved out of range and so their rifles lay uselessly on the ground beside them. Charlie was in high spirits, lying on the other side of Johnny from Michael, propped up on his elbows with a pair of binoculars held to his eyes. “We got them on the run quick enough,” he said, “and do you know why? I mean, apart from the Germans and Italians, the average soldier, the ordinary Spaniard isn’t fighting out of

conviction. Most of them were just in the wrong village or town when the rebellion happened, and they had to choose between Franco's army or the firing line."

The mists of the morning had long since cleared and the sun was blazing down on them. It had been a warm summer so far. Even in the shade of the trees, the heat was suffocating, and sweat trickled down Michael's spine underneath the rough material of his shirt. His mouth had been dry ever since he'd shot the soldier.

"Have you any water left Johnny?"

Johnny had dark patches under his arms and sweat glistened among the black stubble of his beard. "Sorry pal, it's done."

"I'm dying of drouth."

"Don't know about water," Johnny said, rolling on to his side and reaching into his pockets for his cigarettes. "but I'd sell my granny for a pint, to be honest." He offered the cigarettes to Charlie. "Want one?"

"A pint? Go on then," said Charlie, smiling.

"I've none about me, but you can have a fag if you like."

"You're all right."

Charlie passed his canteen to Johnny, who passed it to Michael.

"Looks like you're in luck."

"Ta Charlie."

"No bother, just don't finish it all though, eh?"

Michael unscrewed the top and took a sip, letting the liquid pool on his tongue. It was lukewarm, but it relieved his cracked lips and furred tongue. He took another swig and then passed it back along to Charlie.

Peter crawled over to them. "What's the craic?" said Johnny.

"Looks like they're digging in," said Peter. "I've taken a note of their position, and we'll get the word back to headquarters, hopefully our planes'll be coming over tonight anyway. For now, let's head back to the village."

Michael volunteered for the watch that night, in the tower of the church. He didn't want to be around the rest of the company. He'd already been slapped on the back and congratulated enough but every time he was reminded of the morning he felt slightly sick. He couldn't get the picture out of his head, the boy trying to lift his arms above his head while blood bubbled out of his throat. It was the first time he'd killed someone. But if it hadn't been the soldier it would have been himself lying dead, Johnny was right about that. Johnny was in a foul mood,

stalking the floor of the small room while Michael sat by the window, looking out over the village. The church was in the main square but the low buildings made it easy to see out across the village to the olive groves where they'd been that afternoon. It was a clear night, too, a full, bone white moon casting blue light and black shadows. It would make it easy for bombers, thought Michael, before casting the thought out from his mind as unlucky. From the square below they could hear singing. A temporary messhall had been set up in a bar across the square from the church and the rest of the men were there, eating and drinking and making merry. Michael was relieved all over again that he wasn't down there.

"It's not like they're getting pissed, or anything," he said, as Johnny flung the butt of a cigarette down on the ground. "You know Peter's pretty strict about drinking, and he'll be especially strict tonight. I think he thinks they're coming back, you know. That's why he's got us up here."

"Aye."

"Bill and Eddie have it worse. At least we're not sitting in a cowshed outside the village."

"True. I wonder if anyone brought them any dinner?"

"There was plenty hay. I'm sure the cows won't mind sharing."

Michael looked down at the square again. A figure had detached itself from the darkness of the bar and was walking across the square to the church.

"Think ours is coming now," said Michael.

"Ya beauty," said Johnny, rubbing his hands together. "I'm so hungry I could eat a scabby dug."

After a couple of minutes Charlie appeared through the doorway.

"Fucking hell, that's some amount of stairs," he said, bending over and putting his hands on his knees. "I'm knackered."

"Tell me you brought us some dinner," said Johnny.

Charlie nodded, straightening up and putting his hands into his pockets. "I have some ham," he said, "and bread." He pulled the food out and put it on the table. "And," he said, grinning at them and slowly opening his jacket to reveal the narrow head of a bottle of wine sticking out of his inside pocket, "something to wash it down with."

"Ta," said Michael, as Charlie tossed him over one of the pieces of bread. It was slightly stale but not too bad. The ham was well cured, with a smoky flavour.

"Beats garbanzos any day, eh?" mumbled Johnny, his mouth full.

Charlie pulled the cork out of the bottle and took a swig.

“Here, thought that was for us,” said Johnny, swallowing his food. “From the sounds of things you boys have had your fair share downstairs.”

“Nah, that’s just high spirits, no actual spirits involved,” said Charlie. “Peter’s sticking to the one glass ration, same as usual. Think he wants everyone to be on their game tonight, just in case.”

“I’m surprised he sent us up any wine then,” said Michael, taking another bite of his ham and bread.

“He didn’t,” said Charlie. “I took the liberty of procuring this. Pretty sure Arthur clocked me, but he didn’t say anything.” He passed Johnny the bottle.

“Good lad,” said Johnny, taking a long drink and passing it on to Michael.

Michael looked out the window over the village as he finished chewing and took a mouthful of the wine. He wondered where all the inhabitants were tonight, how many of the men had joined the rebels, or the Republican army, how many, like the boy today, wouldn’t be coming home again. How many of his own company would be going home? He looked out past the boundaries of the village in the direction of the fascist line, and wondered if the women and children were sleeping in trenches alongside the rebels, while the brigadiers would be sleeping in their beds. He’d checked inside a few houses with Johnny on their way through the village, earlier that day. Most of them had been one room or two roomed houses, a bit like single ends and double ends at home. Worn bedding and earthen floors, blackened hearths and empty cupboards. He could almost imagine his own mother standing over one of those fireplaces as she stood over the range at home, his father trudging out to the fields every morning instead of to the shipyards. Spain or Scotland, there didn’t seem to be much difference in the lives of the poor, at any rate.

“Penny for them,” said Charlie, leaning forward and taking the bottle out of his hands.

Michael started, roused from his thoughts. “I was just thinking about the people that lived in this village.”

“That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it?” said Charlie, taking a drink of the bottle and passing it on to Johnny. “I mean, the peasant class in Spain is the same as the working class at home. All the reforms that the Republic was trying to push through, education, minimum wage, fair employment rules, it was all for the people. But the upper classes didn’t like it, the Church didn’t like it, the army didn’t like it. They all want a foot on the neck of the working man, Spanish or English, doesn’t matter.”

A gunshot rang out across the darkened village.

“Fuck,” said Johnny, pushing himself off the wall he’d been leaning against and coming over to the window to stand at Michael’s shoulder. “Fuck, they’re coming back.”

Michael looked down towards the outskirts of the village. He could see a black mass of figures just beyond Eddie and Bill’s lookout post. A chorus of wailing started, and the hairs rose up on Michael’s neck. One dark figure detached itself from the group and started running through the streets towards them, arms and legs pumping fast.

“What’s going on?” said Charlie.

“I don’t know, I think that’s Bill. What should we do, should we stay here or go down, I don’t know.”

“Go down and find out what’s going on,” said Johnny. “I’ll stay up here and keep the watch.”

Charlie and Michael raced down the stairs, two at a time, and arrived outside the church just as Bill appeared in the square. The rest of the men had fanned out across the square, taking up defensive positions at corners.

“What happened?” said Peter, who was standing at the bottom of the church steps.

Bill bent down, gasping, with his hands on his thighs. “Eddie shot a girl. He shot a girl.”

“What?”

“The fascists sent them back but Eddie just saw a figure, we didn’t know, they didn’t call out to let us know, we didn’t know.”

Peter turned around and saw Charlie and Michael. “What are you two doing here?”

“Johnny’s still upstairs...we heard the shot,” said Michael.

“Alright. Charlie, you go back upstairs. Michael, come with me.”

“Where?”

“To sort this fucking mess out.”

They walked quickly through the darkened village, through blue moonlight and black shadows. The only sound was the wailing and crying of the unseen women. When they arrived Eddie was standing apart from the villagers, his face grey. He turned to Peter and there were tears standing in his eyes, caught by the light and gleaming.

“I didn’t know,” he said, “I just saw them coming, I couldn’t see who they were. I thought it was the fascists. Jesus, Peter, she’s just a kid. I just fired, I didn’t know.”

Peter shook his head, his expression one of anger and resignation. “I know you didn’t do it on purpose, Eddie.”

“I thought it was the fascists,” he said, looking at Michael. “I didn’t know.” He sat down on the ground and put his head in his hands.

Peter met Bill’s eye and jerked his head towards Eddie. Bill crouched down on the ground with him and Peter started walking towards the villagers.

“Come on,” he said to Michael.

The villagers drew back to let them in, crying children, old men not meeting their eyes, women with faces distorted with grief. In the centre of the group there was a girl lying on the ground, twelve, maybe, or thirteen, her head on the lap of a woman, long hair spilling over the woman’s legs like an inky cloud. The girl’s eyes were closed, and her face was untouched. She was very pretty, a hint of childish roundness still in the cheeks, a dimple in her chin, a full bottom lip and a deep dent above the bow of her upper lip. She looked like she was sleeping, until Michael saw the blood that had soaked her dress and darkened the ground around her.

Peter tapped him on the shoulder. “I’ve talked to one of the older men,” he said. “They’ll come back to the village. Will you carry her?”

“What?” said Michael. “You want me to carry her?”

“Someone’s got to, don’t they? I’ll cover us from the rear if you do. Bill and Eddie are in no fit state to do it.”

Michael stepped forward and crouched down beside the girl. The woman looked up at him. He could see the fury in her face, in her whole body, she seemed to shimmer with it, as if she was only able to physically contain it through sheer effort of will or else fly off into a thousand pieces. He reached forward and she spoke.

“Non tocar mi hija,” she said, “o te mataré.”

Even though he didn’t understand the meaning of the words, he understood the tone and stood back up again. The woman lifted her hand and pushed her hair back from her face, leaving a streak of blood across her forehead and mouth. It looked black in the blue light. She pulled the girl to her and rose with the body in her arms. Her long thin legs flopped over the woman’s arms, one arm dangling. An old woman, dressed in black, stepped forward and lifted her arm up, placing it over her body.

“Her name was Rosita,” said Peter, shaking his head. “You stay at the front, near the mother. I’ll go at the back.”

They started walking slowly towards the village. When they passed Bill and Eddie, still sitting on the ground, the woman stopped for a moment in front of them. Eddie looked up and he opened his mouth, but he didn’t say anything.



“Asesino,” she said, her voice dark with fury, and she spat on the ground in front of him.

When Michael got back to the church he trudged up the stairs slowly. He knew that Johnny and Charlie would ask him about what happened and he didn’t want to talk about it. He pushed the door open slowly. Charlie was sitting at the window, Johnny on the floor with his back against the wall, legs stretched out in front of him and the bottle of wine by his side. He looked up and held the bottle out to Michael.

“Yous didn’t finish it?” said Michael.

“I thought you’d need a drink.”

“What happened?” said Charlie.

“Eddie shot a wee girl, a lassie of about twelve. He thought she was a soldier.”

“Is she dead?”

“Aye.”

“Did they bring her back?”

“They’d hardly leave her lying out in a field Charlie,” said Johnny. “Jesus. How’s Eddie?”

Michael shook his head and took a swig from the bottle.

“Fuck.”

“Aye.”

Charlie stood up. “I don’t know if I should go back down, now that you’re back, what did Peter say?”

“He never said anything, just told me to go back to my post.”

“I don’t want to go down.”

“Don’t go then,” said Johnny. “Just stay here with us.”

That night the bombers came, howling down out of the sky, filling the night with fire and noise. Michael and Johnny were still sitting up. Charlie was asleep on the floor, his head on Johnny’s jacket. Johnny shook him awake as soon as they heard the thin whine of the planes.

“Are they ours?” said Charlie.

The first bomb fell, landing on the outskirts of the village. There was an explosion and then the sound of women screaming.

“Not if they’re bombing us,” said Johnny, his face grim. “Let’s get to fuck out of here.”

As they ran down the stairs there was another explosion, and another. They could feel the building tremble.

“Shit, that one must have been close,” Charlie shouted over the noise.

They tumbled out of the doorway and stopped on the church steps. Across the square, there was a smoking heap of rubble where the bar had been.

“Fucking typical,” said Johnny. There was another explosion, so close that it made Michael’s head ring. There were people everywhere, members of the company running back and forward across the square through clouds of dust, women rushing out of their houses, dragging children with them, German planes swooping and dipping overhead.

“Where’s Peter?” shouted Johnny.

“What do we do?”

“I don’t fucking know, do I?”

Peter appeared out of the main door of the church. “There’s a crypt,” he shouted, “but the door’s locked. Johnny and Charlie, get in there and break it down. Michael, grab a couple of lads and start getting the villagers in there. Check the houses around the square but don’t go any further, get back here as fast as you can.”

Johnny and Charlie disappeared inside the church and Michael ran down the steps and grabbed Arthur and Bill. “Get them inside the church,” he yelled, gesturing to the people running about in the square.

“The church? They’ll know people would go there!” shouted Bill.

“There’s a crypt, we’re going down into the crypt, Johnny and Charlie are in there breaking the door open the now.”

“Right,” said Arthur, and they both turned to the square. Michael ran to the first house next to the church, but as he reached the front door it opened and an old man appeared, holding his trousers up with his hand.

“Go to the church!” Michael shouted, pointing to the steps.

“L’iglesia?”

“Sí, sí, l’iglesia,” he said, and ran to the next house. He opened the door to find the family under the kitchen table, a woman crouched with her arms round two small children and an old woman who was on her hands and knees, tears running down her face.

“L’iglesia!” he shouted, pointing to the door, and ran back out and into the next house. When he opened the door he stopped on the threshold. The girl, the one that was killed, Rosita, was lying on the kitchen table. Her eyes were closed now and she wasn’t wearing the bloodstained dress, in fact there was no sign of what had happened. Her mother

was standing at the end of the table, holding her daughter's heel in the palm of her hand, fitting a shiny black shoe over her foot. She walked back round the table, sat down in a chair next to the girl's head and looked at Michael.

"We have to go," Michael shouted. "L'iglesia...um, vamos l'iglesia. They're bombing us!"

"I'm not leaving my daughter alone," she said.

"We have to go! We have to go now!"

"I'm not leaving my daughter alone," she repeated, speaking slowly and enunciating every syllable.

Michael didn't know what to do, how to walk out, how to break away from her terrible gaze. He felt someone grab his arm. He turned and it was Johnny.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he yelled. "Get the fuck into the church."

"I can't leave her sitting here, Johnny!"

"If she doesn't want to come, she doesn't want to come. Now fucking move!"

Michael kept his eyes on the woman as Johnny dragged him away, sitting by the table, her hands folded in her lap, the dead girl lying beside her. Even when they were inside the church and down in the crypt, it was all that Michael could see.

## Antonia's Story

It was just after noon when Ana stepped out into the street. The enormous bronze bells in the tower of the cathedral had rung out the hours, the sonorous notes reverberating through the streets of the city centre before dying away. She stood for a moment outside the military offices, undecided. She was shaking, sick and dizzy with exhaustion and revulsion. Although she stood in sunlight, she couldn't feel the sun on her skin. She turned towards the street that led to Puente Cueva and then stopped. Home was an unbearable thought. She would go to Mercedes.

It was that hour of the day where the city started to wind down, as if the heat of the sun beating down on its streets had a soporific effect. Women were making their way home, half empty shopping baskets over their arms. Bartenders were rinsing the final coffee cups from the morning's trade and rolling down their shutters. Shopkeepers were counting the morning's takings, shaking their heads. Through the streets of the city centre, past the offices and shops and bars and restaurants, past the street where her father's shop had been, past the small church where she'd been married, past the building where Jacinto lived, Ana ran, drawing curious glances from those making their way homewards. Her feet slapped off the cobblestones but she didn't feel it. The wind whipped her face but drew no tears from her eyes. But her chest was tight, her breath coming with difficulty. When she'd crossed the river she stopped, panting, her hand against a tree, but when she realised that her skin couldn't feel the roughness of the bark, she snatched her hand away as if she'd been burned. Despair rose inside her but she kept going, stumbling through the streets of the artists' quarter. Only two weeks ago she'd walked here, the sight of empty streets and shuttered bars and deserted plazas filling her with sadness. Now she was numb to it all.

When she arrived at the door of the brothel she hammered on it with her fists until Mercedes opened it. Her mouth opened in shock when she saw Ana leaning in the doorway. Ana understood her expression when Mercedes led her inside and she caught a glimpse of herself in one of the long mirrors in the hallway. Blood all over her dress, the front of her hair fallen out of its knot and wild with the wind, her face gaunt and white, lips chapped and purple rings below her eyes. She noted dispassionately that there were silvery threads in her hair and that her collarbones were standing out through her skin.

"Sister..."

Ana looked at Mercedes, who was standing in the doorway of the salon, holding the door open for her.

“Come. Sit.”

Ana followed her through and sat down on the low chair opposite the sofa where Mercedes was sitting.

“What’s happened to you, Ana?”

When Ana tried to speak her voice was a croak. Mercedes rose and went into the kitchen, returning with a glass of water.

“Tell me what’s happened to you, sister.”

Ana couldn’t bring herself to meet Mercedes’ eyes, but the words poured out of her. She began with that day she’d gone into Elisa’s apartment and met Teresa, and told her everything. When she finally stopped speaking, she looked up. Antonia was sitting on a chair next to the door. Mercedes reached over and took Ana’s hands into her own, looking intently into Ana’s eyes. After a moment she dropped Ana’s hands and leant back, her hand over her mouth, her face drained of colour.

“Your hands... You can’t go back there, sister.”

“I have to go back. If I don’t, I’ll never see Frasco again.”

“What will you bring him?”

“It doesn’t matter what she brings.”

Mercedes looked at Antonia with surprise. “How do you know?”

“I know what kind of man he is. He’ll take everything from her, because that’s what he does, because he can.”

Ana leant her head on her hand, covering her eyes. “She’s right. He told me so himself.”

“There must be something he’ll accept. Why would he ask you to find these things for him if he wanted them from you yourself?”

Ana shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“To torture you. To watch you try. It’s a game for him, can’t you see that?”

“But why?” Ana could hear the pain in her own voice.

“Because that’s what he does. Because he can,” Antonia repeated.

“But why her?”

“Not just me,” Ana said. “Teresa too.” She thought of the woman she’d seen leaving the captain’s office, the look in her eyes, the way she was twisting her hands. “I think there have been many women.”

Antonia looked at Mercedes. "She's right."

"How do you know?" said Mercedes.

Ana looked at Antonia, and saw the flatness in her eyes, the dullness of her skin, the hardness in her face, and she knew.

"You went to the captain."

Antonia nodded. "There was a woman in Salapura. She went to him for her son. He came back, he escaped to France. She told me about the captain. I didn't ask what she'd had to do. I assumed – I just assumed she'd had to sleep with him."

"That's what I thought, with Teresa."

"I thought, I could do that, if it meant Julian coming back."

"Julian?"

"My fiancée. We grew up on the same street. I loved him all my life."

"You tried to save him," Ana said.

Antonia nodded. "I went to the captain and he took my eyes."

"But what does it mean?" said Mercedes. "You still have eyes. You see."

Ana and Antonia spoke in unison. "It's not the same."

"And then he took my hands," said Ana.

"But you still have hands, sister."

"Did you never wonder," Antonia interrupted, "why the men don't – don't pay as much for me as they do for you and Marguerita, as they did for Simona?"

Mercedes shook her head. "I don't know how much they pay. I leave that to Luisa."

"They don't pay as much for me because there's no heat in my skin any more."

"We're all faking it, sister."

"I can't fake this, what he took from me."

"He asked me for a heart..." said Ana.

"That has truly loved," Antonia finished.

"What did you do?" said Ana.

"I didn't go back."

"You didn't go back? But he said, if I didn't go back-"

Antonia looked down at her hands. "Julian's mother got the telegram two weeks later. It said he'd died in prison, that he'd had a wound that had turned septic."

Ana closed her eyes. "So if I don't go back..."

"You'll get a telegram about Frasco. It will arrive in two weeks, or three, and it will say the same, or something very like it."

“No,” said Ana, sitting up. “No. Not Frasco.”

“But why?” said Mercedes. “Why does he do it?”

“I used to be like her,” said Antonia, nodding at Ana. “When she walked in here I saw it at once. Luisa saw it as well. I know this, I could see it in the way Luisa looked at her, that hungry look, the way she looks at all the girls who come to work here. That’s what the captain saw in her, that’s what he wants from her. He wants to destroy that in her. He wants to take that feeling and that hope, and turn it into deadness and despair.”

There was a silence in the room when Antonia finished speaking, the three women each locked in their own thoughts. Mercedes was the first to speak.

“What will you do, sister?”

There was a pause before Ana answered, and when she did, her words seemed to drop like stones into the silence.

“I will go to the captain in seven days, as I said I would.”

Antonia shook her head. “You’re a fool, Ana. You’re sacrificing yourself for a man. You’re making the same mistake I did.”

“I’m not doing it for the capitan. I’m doing it for Frasco.”

“That’s who I mean.”

“If he dies, Antonia, so will I.”

“This will be a death! Will Frasco bring you back to life, once the captain has finished with you? There’s nothing you can bring him that will satisfy him.” Antonia said.

“I can’t advise you, sister,” said Mercedes. “But we will come with you when you go to him again.”

“No. He would be angry.”

“He won’t know. We’ll wait outside for you,” Antonia said.

“Do you want to stay here with us until then?” Mercedes asked.

“No,” said Ana. “I have to bury Elisa. It’s the least I can do.” Her voice broke on Elisa’s name. She’d mutilated the body of a woman she’d loved like a mother. She’d taken the hands from the corpse of a friend. As if reading her thoughts, Mercedes said, “Sister, she was already dead. It wasn’t a betrayal.”

Ana shook her head. “I know what happened, Mercedes. It was a terrible thing I did.

Madrid, August 1937

Once they were all sitting round the long table and Bill had emptied the dark green bottles into their glasses, Johnny raised his drink.

“To all the lads that aren’t here with us tonight,” he said. “To Arthur, James, Neil, Hugh, Chris, Jacky.”

They all repeated the litany of names, glasses in their hands.

“And to all the other Brigadiers,” said Charlie, “who’ve died here, far away from their own countries, in the defence of democracy.”

Michael took a sip of wine and set his glass down on the table. He looked around but everyone was looking down, thinking about the boys that had been killed. Before they’d just been playacting, it had been an adventure, but since Brunete they’d all been aware of their own mortality. Silence hung over the table before Johnny spoke again.

“Right,” he said, “we owe it to them to have a good time tonight. After all, we’re back in the line tomorrow.” He downed his drink, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “I’ll get the next round in. Give us a hand, Mickey, eh?”

Michael finished his drink in a couple of gulps and followed Johnny across the room. The old bartender leant forward, elbows on the bar, and raised his eyebrows at them. Behind him rows of dusty bottles glinted darkly against smoke stained walls. Johnny emptied out his pockets, a handful of coins and notes on the scarred wooden surface. He looked back at the table and narrowed his eyes.

“Alright, five bottles, um... five bottles more,” he said, holding up his hand, fingers outspread.

“Cinco? Va bien,” said the bartender, leaning down under the counter and lifting the bottles one by one on to the bar.

Michael looked around. All the tables were busy and the noise of conversation almost drowned out the scratching of the gramophone player. It was mostly men, only a couple of women through the crowd.

Johnny followed his gaze. “We need to find ourselves a couple of girls tonight, eh Mickey?”

Michael shrugged.

“Ah, come on, man, it’s our last night of leave, we’re back to the front tomorrow. Don’t know about you but I don’t want to spend my last night next to Charlie, do you?”



Michael laughed. The night before they'd got hammered drunk and ended up at a hotel where members of the International Brigades often stayed, but there had only been one bed left. They'd flipped a coin for it, and Michael won, but Johnny had pushed in next to him anyway. "I've spent the last six months sleeping on the ground," he'd said, "I don't give a fuck if you're in here, I'm not sleeping on the floor when there's a bed in the room."

Charlie had lain on the floor for a bit but just as Michael was drifting off to sleep he landed in on top of them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Johnny's voice had been muffled by the pillows.

"I don't want to sleep on the floor neither," slurred Charlie.

"Well you're going in the middle," Michael had said.

"Ow you wee shite, get your elbow out of my back, will you?"

They'd eventually fallen asleep and when they'd woken up in the morning Charlie had his arms round Michael.

"I imagine he got a fright when he woke up and had your coupon staring back at him instead of...what's his lassie's name?" Johnny said as he handed the money over to the bartender.

"Gwennie," said Michael, picking up two of the bottles.

"Aye, that's the one," said Johnny. "Anyway, I'm after a click tonight."

"I don't know," said Michael, pushing his way past a table of girls. Johnny winked at one of them and they all started giggling. They arrived back at the table and set the bottles down. Johnny began pouring the drinks out but when he got to the last bottle it was still corked.

"He's not opened that one," he said, standing up again. "Back in a minute."

"I mean, how are we supposed to know what's going on?" Harry was saying. "We're moved from front to front, we've not had an outright victory yet, the front line stretches across half the country and nobody is telling us anything."

"Well Franco's not in Madrid yet," said Bill, raising his glass. "That means we're winning."

Eddie clinked glasses with him and they both took a swig of wine.

"Does it though?" Harry persisted. "Or does it mean we're just resisting? Think about it, if we were making significant inroads into Nationalist territory, don't you think they'd tell us about it?"

Michael slid on to the bench next to Charlie, who was sitting staring into his drink.

"You all right, Charlie?"

“I suppose,” Charlie said, looking up at him. “I just...nah, doesn’t matter.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s our last night of leave. Johnny’s right, we should have a good time.”

Michael flicked the bottom of his cigarette packet with his nail, a trick he’d learnt from Johnny, and two cigarettes popped up from the rest. He offered one to Charlie.

“Anyone got matches?” he said. “I can’t find mine.”

Bill slid a box along the table and went back to his conversation with Harry. Michael lit up and passed the match to Charlie. He took a deep drag of his cigarette, blowing the smoke up above his head. Across the room Johnny was sitting at the table with the girls he’d winked at earlier. One of them was trying on his cap and they were all laughing at something he’d said. Michael nodded across at him and Charlie looked round and rolled his eyes.

“You’ve got time, anyway,” said Michael. “I’d say he’ll be over there for a while.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Well, I know we’ve been here for seven months now, almost,” said Charlie. “And I knew I was coming over to fight a war.”

“Aye,” said Michael, taking another drink from his glass.

“A war that needs fought,” said Charlie. “I knew that before I joined up and I still know it. It’s just...”

“What?”

“I don’t want to be buried here.”

Michael stubbed out his cigarette in the large ceramic ashtray in the centre of the table. They’d only been there half an hour or so but it was already overflowing with ash and douts.

“I mean, I know that I might be killed here,” Charlie continued, draining his glass. “It’s a war, that’s what happens if you’re a soldier.”

“Aye.”

“But I never thought about where I’d be buried. The idea of your body going into the ground of a country that’s not your own. None of your people coming to visit the grave, because nobody would know where you were, and the people that live here don’t know me. So the people who would maybe pass the grave, and think on me buried there, wouldn’t know anything about me, where I grew up or my family or anything.”

Michael didn’t know what to say.

“I keep thinking about the day we buried Arthur, do you remember?”

Michael nodded.

“I mean, Arthur’s wife and children don’t know where he’s buried,” said Charlie.  
“They’ll never visit that grave.”

“Jesus Charlie.” Johnny’s voice broke into their thoughts as he pushed his way on to the bench between them. “What did I say earlier?”

“I know, it’s just-”

“Just nothing.”

“He’s right, Charlie,” said Michael. “We’ve only tonight, we should make the most of it. I mean, if Arthur was here, he’d be getting pissed and having a laugh too.”

“Actually, he’d probably be telling us all to stay sober so we’d not miss the train tomorrow,” said Johnny. “Come on, wee yin, buck up. Away up and get us some more drinks, my glass is almost empty. I’ll give you a hand.”

Charlie smiled. “You just want another excuse to go past the table full of girls.”

“He knows me too well, eh Mickey?” said Johnny. “Finish that drink, we’ll be back in a minute.”

A couple of hours later they were all well on their way. Charlie was waxing lyrical about the miner’s strike, again, swaying from side to side and gesturing, but nobody was paying much attention apart from Bill, who was talking over the top of him about the dockers’ strike in Liverpool. Eddie was holding a lit cigarette that drooped from between his fingers with a long tail of ash and muttering darkly about Communist control. Empty bottles littered the table, circles of spilled wine darkening the wood. Harry stood up, putting his hands on the table to balance himself.

“Well, I’m not going back to the front without the touch of a woman,” he said, his words slurred.

Michael looked up and grinned. He liked Harry, a Londoner who’d joined their company in Madrigueras.

“Now, this chap at the hotel gave me the address of a little place that’s open late, where the girls are very friendly. How about it?”

Bill shrugged and drained his glass. “I’m in. What about you Johnny?”

They all started laughing as they pulled their jackets on. “I’m surprised you’re even asking,” said Harry.

Johnny lifted a bottle and topped up his drink. “Are yous kidding?” he said, leaning back on the bench. “I’m not going to any hoorhouse. Johnny Hay’s never had to pay for it in his life, and he’s not about to start now.”

Bill rolled his eyes amid the chorus of laughter and boos. "What about you Mickey?"

"Nah, I'll stay here and keep Johnny company, just in case he's no luck with the women."

"No chance," said Johnny, finishing his drink. "I'll away up and get us more drinks then. Anyone else staying? Charlie?"

Charlie already had his jacket on but he sat back down. "I suppose I'll stay," he said sheepishly, his face going red.

Johnny stood up, stumbling slightly as he climbed over the bench. "Go if you want," said Johnny, winking at Michael.

"But if you're both staying..." said Charlie, glancing from Johnny to Harry.

"Away you go," Johnny said. "We'll see you the morra."

Charlie looked at Michael.

"Aye," said Michael. "We'll see you at the station."

They all trooped out the door and Michael looked around. The bar had emptied out, it was getting late, and without the noise of conversation all around him the sound of the music seemed much louder than before. It was a Spanish record that was playing, a woman's voice, something slow and very sad. Johnny was up at the bar getting another bottle of wine and four new glasses. Michael smiled and shook his head as Johnny went over to the table where the girls had been sitting. There were only two of them left, the one who'd tried on Johnny's cap and another girl. As Michael watched they stood up and lifted their coats, following Johnny back over.

"Mickey, this is Mónica and Olávia, I've invited them to join us for a little drink."

The two girls smiled at Michael as they sat down, and Johnny set out the glasses and poured the wine.

"What are we drinking to?" asked Michael, lifting his glass.

"To the International Brigades," said Mónica, smiling at Johnny as he slid on to the bench next to her.

They all raised their glasses and drank.

Olávia turned to Michael. "Mickey is your name?"

"Michael."

"Oh, Michael...like Miguel, no?"

"I suppose so, yes." He looked at her, but she was looking down at her lap, twisting her glass around in her hand. There was an awkward silence and Michael tried desperately to

think of things to say, but nothing came to mind. She looked up at him and smiled, and looked away again.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked.

“Sí, I would like to dance,” she said, and she smiled again, “but there is not a space.”

“I’ll make a space,” he said, grateful for something to do. If they were dancing they didn’t have to sit there in silence. He stood up and pushed a couple of tables away from the corner of the room. A chair fell over and the bartender shouted something, but the girl, Olávia, called back in quick Spanish and he shrugged his shoulders and turned the gramophone so that the speaker was facing towards them. Olávia stood up and stepped through the tables to where Michael was standing. He held out his hand and she took it, he put his hand on her waist and she placed her hand on his shoulder, and they started to dance. Nothing complicated, Michael wasn’t sure if the dances were the same in Spain and besides, he was fairly drunk and didn’t want to make a fool of himself. So they just waltzed, very slow and small in the tight space. He could feel the muscles in her back moving under his hand, through the thin material of her dress, and he decided to risk a twirl, lifting her hand and turning her round. She laughed and moved a little closer to him. Her hair smelled like burnt sugar, it tickled his cheek and he twirled her again, this time dipping her slightly as she turned back round. She laughed again and looked up at him, and as they turned the light from the lamp on the wall behind them caught her eyes and he realised that they weren’t in fact black, but a very dark brown, the irises only distinguishable from the pupils in the light, and at a very close range.

The bar slowly emptied and the bartender began putting the chairs up on the tables, sweeping the floor, turning off the lights, but he left the music on and the candles burning, and they danced for another while, the lights getting lower and lower and the music getting softer and softer until it eventually stopped. Michael stepped back and bowed slightly, and Olávia curtsied, pulling out the skirt of her dress and putting one foot behind the other. There was a sound of clapping and Michael turned to see Johnny and his girl.

“Mónica invited us back to their apartment for another drink,” said Johnny. “Olávia and her live just near here. What do you think?”

Michael looked at Olávia and she shrugged. “You are welcome to come,” she said.

“All right.”

Johnny tossed him over his jacket and cap and they walked up the stairs and out on to the street.

The apartment was a few streets away and they walked slowly, arm in arm. Johnny and Mónica were up ahead, he had his arm slung across her shoulders and his jacket hooked over the other shoulder. He was a little drunk too, Michael could tell from the way he was swaggering. Michael looked down at Olávia but she was looking at the ground, stepping carefully.

"You must be careful," she explained. "There are holes in the cobblestones, they pulled them up for the barricades last October but they didn't put them all back."

"I see," said Michael. There was a pause. "Did you fight? I mean, in the militias, before the government changed it, or..."

"I fought," she said, nodding. Her voice was suddenly hard. "So did Mónica. So did María, and Salma, and Liliana, the other girls from the bar tonight. It's not only men who can be soldiers."

"That's not what I meant," said Michael, surprised. "I didn't think-"

"Well it's what you Communists thought. Why should we not be allowed to fight? It's our country too. It's – the men we loved were fighting, we should have been allowed to fight beside them.

Up ahead Johnny and Mónica had gone into a building. The sound of the door shutting behind them echoed along the street.

"I'm not a Communist," said Michael.

She didn't reply.

"I mean, I think you're right."

After a couple of minutes they arrived at the door. Olávia fumbled in her bag for the keys and opened the door. Michael stepped back and allowed her in first. They climbed up the stairs, passing the first landing, the second, the third.

"There are a lot of steps," she said. "We live at the top floor."

Michael didn't reply. He was thinking of the last time he'd climbed up the close stairs behind a girl. He wondered where Leila was tonight. It was late, she'd probably be asleep in the bed they'd shared, after a day of rehearsing, maybe an evening of performing. Maybe she'd got back to her dressing room to find flowers from a man who'd wait for her at stage door and take her home. Maybe he was with her in that bed right now, instead of Michael. But then again, who could blame her? For all she knew he'd never come back. For all anyone knew, he might not. Johnny was right. He had to make the most of tonight. He wouldn't think on Leila any more.

They went into the apartment. “That’s Mónica’s room,” said Olávia, nodding to the closed door, next to the kitchen. There was the sound of music and muffled laughter. Olávia stepped through the first doorway. “This is my room,” she said, turning on the light. There was a bed pushed up against the wall and a large window which was open. It was very warm and Michael went across to the window and leant on the sill. A very small breeze, barely a breath, stirred the hair on his forearms. The light went off behind him. Olávia’s arms slid round his waist and when he turned round she was standing there, her face tilted towards his, eyes closed. He kissed her and she kissed him back, sliding her hand up his back and into his hair, twisting it round her fingers. Michael put his hands on her waist, the part that curved, between her ribs and her hips. She led him over to the bed and they sat down, still kissing, Michael leaning over her until she was lying on her side and he was facing her, running his hand down her side and over the curve of her hip to her thigh. Suddenly there was a wetness on his face and he pulled away, touching his cheeks. He licked his lips and tasted salt, and realised that Olávia was crying.

“What...what’s wrong?” he asked.

She didn’t reply, turned to face the wall instead. He lay there on his side, not knowing what to do. A tentative hand on her shoulder met with no response, good or bad, so he put his arm around her. After a minute he felt her hand creep into his and hold it. She was still crying, he could feel her tears running down the back of his hand. They lay like that for a long time, until eventually he fell asleep.

When Michael woke up, it was still dark outside, but he could hear birds singing and the sound of music from the next room, very soft, almost inaudible. The room was cold now, the breeze strong through the open window. Olávia was asleep, her breathing slow and deep, her side gently rising and falling under his arm. When he sat up she didn’t wake. His head hurt, too much wine, and his mouth was pasty and dry. He closed the window and went out of her room and along through the darkness of the corridor to the kitchen that was only big enough to stand in. The door to Mónica’s room was ajar, and there was a flickering light inside. Michael walked along very quietly, trying not to wake them up, but as he passed the door he caught a glimpse of the inside of the room. They weren’t sleeping, they were standing in the middle of the floor, turning very slowly, barely moving to the music. Johnny was barefoot, wearing only his shorts, and Mónica was wearing a slip. As they moved closer together again they turned slightly and Michael saw tears in Johnny’s eyes, glistening in the candlelight. He suddenly felt an unbearable sadness, for all his friends that had died and would die before the

war was over, for Leila, hundreds of miles away and with no way of knowing that she was on his mind tonight, for the girl in the next room who'd cried herself to sleep in a stranger's arms, for a soldier who was dancing with a girl he'd picked up in a bar the night before he went back to the front, a soldier who never wept and yet had tears in his eyes, now.



## The Theatre

It was early evening when Ana left the brothel. She'd sat in the salon for hours, talking with Mercedes and Antonia. They'd drawn Frasco into the conversation, asking questions about him. Perhaps they had sensed that the thought of him was the only thing she was holding on to, and talking about him had helped, making him seem closer to her. Only seven more days, but would he even recognise her? Surely he'd see in her face the terrible thing that she'd done. She stood in the street. She couldn't go home. She couldn't face the handless body in the bloodstained bed. She wouldn't be able even to walk past the door. It was almost time for the curfew and it was dangerous to walk in the city centre after dark, where most of the patrols were centred.

She reached the theatre just as the sun was beginning to dip over the horizon, letting herself in at stage door as before. She walked up the stairs to the main rehearsal room, at the very top of the building. It was a large room, facing west, with a grand piano in one corner and wide windows that looked out across the rooftops of the city to the mountains beyond. Ana climbed up on to the windowsill and watched the sun sinking behind them. She wondered if Frasco, too, was watching the sun set from the windows of San Sebastian.

When the last glow had faded over the horizon and the mountains had merged with the night sky, Ana climbed down from the windowsill. She had been awake for two days and her surroundings had a surreal atmosphere. Her limbs seemed heavy and slow, the air difficult to move through. The flame cast shadows that jumped and flickered and at the door to the wardrobe rooms she looked down to find that wax had spilled down her fingers. She opened the door and went through to the storage rooms, where all the costumes that had been used in every production over the years were hanging up on rails. Ana had only made a fraction of them in the five years she'd worked there. Some of the costumes were forty years old. Ana had always loved looking at them, imagining the actors and actresses who'd worn them, the characters they'd played and the lines they'd spoken. Now, shivering, she walked through the rails quickly until she found the fur coat from a production three years ago. She hadn't sewn it herself but she'd searched the city's furriers until she found the right coat for the character. She'd slipped in to the back of the auditorium on the opening night to watch the production and the silver fur had shimmered and gleamed under the lights as the actress moved across the stage. She'd been backstage when the cast had come off and Pura had pulled the fur off at once, saying, "The sweat's been running off me all night. The weight of this coat, and the heat of the lights, I thought I would melt!" Ana had lifted it from her hands

and hung it on the rail of costumes, slipping a cover over it reverently. Now she pulled the cover off, letting it drop to the floor, and pulled the coat round her shoulders. The weight of it made her realise how tired she was.

She lifted her candle again and went out into the main room. She glanced at the sofa in the corner but it was covered in cobwebs, and so she left the room, walking slowly down the stairs as if in a dream. Her feet took her past the smaller rehearsal rooms, past the canteen, past Alejandro's office and the sound stage, down to stage door. She turned, and walked along the narrow corridor that led round to the side of the stage. The curtain was up and the candle's glow reached the first row of red velvet seats. The rows behind that were in shadow and when she glanced upwards, the flickering light of the flame was lost in the darkness. They'd always left a light burning on stage, even when the building was closed, the ghost light it was called. Well, the ghosts had the run of the theatre now; she was in good company. She crossed the stage to the centre, placed the candle on the floor, and slid the coat from her shoulders. It raised a cloud of dust when it landed, swirling across the wooden boards. Ana lay down on top of the coat, pulling it over her so she was completely wrapped up, and closed her eyes.

She woke in darkness several hours later, struggling through layers of sleep with a panicky feeling of disorientation. As her eyes acclimatised to the darkness she began to calm down. A tiny window up at the side of the roof let in just enough light for her to make out the faintest outlines of the auditorium. She lay back down on her side, her cheek against the boards of the stage, legs curled up under her and the coat pulled over her shoulders and into her chest, and she looked out at the rows of seats which were only just visible. It was strange, she thought, that she could close her eyes and see this auditorium in every detail, bright and vivid; the red of the seats and the gilt of the balcony, the aisle stretching up to the back, where the ushers used to sit, the chandelier hanging in the dome of the roof and filling it with its gaudy sparkle, the statues, Comedy and Tragedy, sitting high up over the stage. Ana wondered what would happen to the theatre after the war, if Alejandro would come back from Madrid and reopen it. She doubted it. It seemed impossible that things could ever return to the way they'd been before the war, when the hum of the crowds at the bar in the foyer had permeated the entire building, and backstage had been a frenzy of activity; the stagehands checking and rechecking the props were in place, the stage manager inspecting the set, the technical staff running through the lighting cues. The actors and actresses would be in their dressing rooms, putting the finishing touches to their makeup as they muttered lines under their breath, while

Ana took their costumes to the dressing rooms and then hung any remaining clothes on a rail behind the stage, ready for the changes.

The opening night of Frasco's first production had been particularly frenetic. Everybody in the city connected with the arts was coming to the play, curious to see the work of this playwright from Barcelona. Frasco's friends from his home city and from Madrid, where he'd worked for two years, had taken trains across the country to see the fruits of his collaboration with Teatro de Ciutadanos. The ushers were all in the foyer, the flowers they always wore on opening nights pinned to their chests, the roses white against the black of their clothes. There was a tense atmosphere backstage; everybody who worked at the theatre, from Arturo to Alejandro, had taken to Frasco right away, and they all wanted his first production with them to be a great success. Frasco himself was the only one who'd seemed unaffected. He'd come round backstage an hour or so before curtains up, making jokes with the lighting crew, popping into the dressing rooms to have a word with the actors, laughing with the stagehands. Ana had bumped into him as she was running down the stairs with her arms full of clothes. He grasped her upper arms to stop her from falling and a momentary thrill ran through her at his touch. They'd been spending a lot of time together for the last two months. He'd come up to wardrobe to talk to her, ostensibly about her costume designs for the play, but the conversation always seemed to drift into other areas, and before they knew it two hours would have passed. He'd wait for her at the end of the day and walk her home along the river. She'd spent the entire evening dancing with him at the retirement party for Gregorio Sierra Rodríguez, the production manager, and every time she'd lifted her eyes to his her stomach had swooped and dipped like a bird inside her. Now she smiled at him and said, "Buena fortuna for tonight, Frasco. Are you nervous?"

"Not really," he'd said, releasing her arms and smiling back at her. "I was watching the rehearsal this afternoon and it was just as I'd imagined. Alejandro has done a great job on it. Besides, I'm only the playwright. If it all goes horribly wrong I can blame it on him, he's the director after all!"

"I suppose so," she'd said, shifting the pile of costumes from one hip to the other. There was a pause. "I'd better get these hung up."

He'd walked with her down the stairs and helped her hang the costumes up on the rail. She'd been conscious of his eyes on her as she straightened them out and brushed them down.

"Are you coming in to watch it tonight?"

“Oh, I don’t think so. I’m quite tired, I think I’ll go home and get an early night,” she’d teased. His face fell with disappointment and she felt bad. “Of course I’m coming round to see it! After all the work I put in, stitching those costumes, I want to see them on stage!”

His face brightened again, and he said in the same teasing tone, “Well that’s the only reason I’m going in to see it!”

The silence between them was broken by the sound of the cast shouting “Mucha mierda!” from the stage. Ana shook her head. “What a stupid superstition.”

“Better to make sure than not,” said Frasco. “And I’m especially careful when it’s my play - I’ve been telling the cast to break their legs all day! I bet you’re trying to sabotage it – made the costumes in yellow and blue, scattered peacock feathers about...you’ve probably been wishing them all ‘Good luck’ and whistling too!”

“Of course not,” said Ana, smiling. “I’ll even say a prayer to St. Genesius for you.”

They’d stood there together, slightly awkwardly, for a minute, before Frasco said, “Would you like to come round to the foyer for a drink? I’ll introduce you to my friends from Madrid.”

“Va bien,” she’d said, pleasantly surprised. Together they’d gone round to the bar where Frasco introduced her to so many people her head was spinning. In the confusion of the three minute bell, she’d found herself sitting next to Frasco. At first she was so acutely aware of his presence beside her that she thought she’d never be able to concentrate on the stage, but after a few minutes she found herself drawn completely into the world of the play. At the interval she’d gone backstage in case she was needed and then returned round to the foyer. She stood at the bar and let the conversation wash over her.

When the lights went up at the end of the play, Ana realised with a start that Frasco wasn’t next to her. He must have slipped out at some point during the second half, she thought, as she applauded with everyone else. She couldn’t see him in the foyer afterwards and he was nowhere to be seen backstage when she went round to take the costumes up to wardrobe. Only when she pushed open the door with her elbow did she see him, standing next to the window, smoking a cigarette.

“What are you doing in here?” she said, surprised.

“I wanted to know how you liked the play,” he said, turning to face her. “I didn’t get a chance to ask you at the interval, and I thought I’d be intercepted by well wishers if I waited for you in the foyer.”

“You could have stayed in your seat,” she said, putting the clothes down on the table, “and asked me when the lights went up.”

He shrugged, grinning sheepishly. “I hate it when people turn around and stare at me at the end of one of my plays.”

“Well, I liked it a lot,” Ana said, turning around and beginning to hang the pieces of clothing up on the rail. “I thought that scene with the soldier and the doctor was great, and when Pura was reading the letter at the end I got goosebumps! My favourite part, though, was the conversation between the brothers, at the start of the second act.”

“Yes, I saw you laughing,” he said. “You put your hand over your mouth.”

There was something in his tone that made Ana feel shy and even though the costumes had all been hung up, she kept fiddling with buttons and collars. There was a moment of silence, and then Ana heard his footsteps crossing the room. She could sense him standing next to her, but she kept her face turned to the rail, the blood rising to her cheeks.

“Ana, are you involved with anybody at the moment?”

She turned to face him slowly. “No. Why?”

“Well, would you like to have dinner together tomorrow night?”

Ana could feel the blush on her cheeks spreading, and was annoyed with herself.

“You blush very prettily,” he said, grinning.

She arched an eyebrow and said, “Is that why you’re asking me to go to dinner with you?”

“Sí,” he laughed.

“Well then no, I won’t go to dinner with you.”

He put his hand on her upper arm, curling his fingers so that his fingertips ran over her skin.

“I was only joking,” he said. “I want to go to dinner with you because I like you, Ana.” There was a pause before he spoke again. “And not only because of your blushes.”

She waited a moment before saying, “Va bien,” and looking up at him from under her eyelashes. “I’d like to have dinner together.”

“Would you like to go down to the bar and have a drink with me just now?” he said, holding out his arm.

Ana slipped her hand through his proffered arm. They’d arrived down in the bar along with the cast, who’d just come round from backstage. Alejandro had some bottles of wine uncorked already and the rest of that night passed in a blur of faces and half heard, half remembered conversations, men in suits with their collars undone and women in jewel-

coloured dresses on their arms, the warmth of Frasco's arm at her back as he introduced her to a seemingly endless string of friends, the chill of the midnight air as they left the theatre and went back to the shabby hotel two streets away where Frasco's friends from Madrid were staying. There must have been about sixty people all crammed into the long room, the actresses from the theatre sitting on the windowsill and flirting with the Madrilenos, blue wreaths of smoke hanging in the air, small conversations eddying and fluttering in the corners. Ana, not wishing to keep Frasco from his friends, went to speak to various people from the theatre, but he was never far away, his eyes on her every time she turned to look over at him. After a couple of hours they both found themselves near the door. Their eyes met and Frasco leant down and whispered in her ear, "Shall we escape?" She nodded her assent and they ran down the stairs hand in hand, nodding to the night porter who smiled beatifically at them over his glass. When they'd fallen out into the street, Ana said in a laughing whisper, "I thought he'd be angry. Are you allowed to have parties like that in hotels?"

"Why are you whispering?" whispered Frasco, laughing back at her.

"I don't know," Ana said, shrugging her shoulders. Her voice sounded very loud on the still night air.

"The boys bribed him with a bottle of brandy that Alejandro borrowed from the bar," said Frasco, "so I'm sure he'll be fine."

There was a moment of silence. The noise of the party floated down to them from the open window, four floors above their heads. Ana looked up at the yellow square of the window. She could see Pura sitting on the windowsill, and the light behind her lit up her hair so that it looked like a halo. Ana put her arms around herself and shivered. It was the darkest part of the night, and the air was cool on her skin. They looked at one another, both suddenly awkward. Ana felt an enormous yawn forcing its way up her throat. She covered her mouth with her hand and turned her head away, embarrassed.

"Tired?" said Frasco. "You can't fool me. Come on, I'll walk you home."

He took off his jacket and put it round her shoulders, and they started to walk in the direction of the river. The narrow cobblestoned streets were empty and dark, the gas lights flaring weakly. It was lucky the sky was clear, Ana thought. The moon provided plenty of light. Frasco took her hand in his when they reached the steps down to the river, and once they were on the stone walkway he didn't release it.

"Frasco," Ana said, as they walked along.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Why did you ask me if I was involved with anyone earlier?"

He stopped walking and turned to face her, still holding her hand, warm in his. Beyond his back Ana could see the moonlight reflecting on the river in a thousand gleaming ripples as the water flowed downstream, and the sleek head of a water rat broke the surface near the opposite bank. The shadows cast by the trees flickered and shifted as the wind blew through the branches, creating a rushing, whispering sound.

“After I first met you I asked Alejandro if you had a fiancé, and he told me that you’d been involved with Jacinto for a year, more or less.”

Ana laughed. “He wasn’t my fiancé!” Frasco didn’t return her smile.

“I know,” he said, looking at her.

“Well there’s nothing between us any more,” Ana said. She could feel the blood rising to her cheeks again. “I broke it off with him two months ago.”

“Just before I started, eh?”

She held his stare. “Just after.” There was a moment of silence before she spoke again. “Is it a problem for you?”

Frasco shrugged. “No. I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t stepping on anyone’s toes.”

Ana smiled at him and squeezed his hand. “Well, you’re not,” she said. There was a moment of silence, the loudest silence in the world, and then he kissed her.

Ana had lain in her bed that night and relived every part of the evening, the moonlight on the dark water, the kiss, the crowds in the theatre, the lights on the stage. Now, lying on her back on the bare boards of that same stage, it all seemed a hundred years ago. She shook her head. It could never be the same again.

## Belchite, September 1937

By now Michael knew what to expect from the hour before an attack. Johnny smoking furiously, but with steady hands, cracking the odd joke to ease the tension. Eddie sitting with his head in his hands, his face grey with nerves. Bill standing calmly, his rifle slung over his back, the tapping of his toe the only sign of his nerves. Charlie talking to anyone that would listen about the cause, the reason they were fighting, the defence of Spanish democracy. The talk flowed around Michael, only the odd word standing out – trade unions, or revolution, or junta – the rest was a blur. He heard the sound of Charlie's voice rather than the sense of his words, but the spiel was familiar enough to know what he was saying and it seemed to calm Charlie, to reassure him that there was a point to it. Michael could never see it though, not in those moments. He was always sick with impatience, just wanting it to start, desperate for it to start. There was no use listing the reasons he'd come here, it seemed like another person's decision, for all his life had been passed here, in this spot, waiting for the battle to start. He didn't think about the danger, the possibility of death, he'd face it happily rather than have the waiting continue, endlessly. Incoherent thoughts writhed around in his head. He tried not to remember anything but suddenly he'd realise that he'd lost memories, memories that he'd wanted to keep. He wouldn't be able to remember the song that his mother used to sing to them at bedtime, or the smell of the Kelvin river in spring, or the colour of Annie's favourite dress when she was a wee girl, she'd worn it until she was bursting out of it. It would all fly out of his head and he'd cast around desperately for the answers, before telling himself that it didn't matter, forcing himself back into the moment, with Johnny smoking on one side of him, Charlie talking on the other. But then his mind would get snagged again on some stupid detail of home and he'd get into a rage, just wanting it over, wanting to move, to swing his rifle round and pull the trigger, to run fast enough to leave his mind behind.

And then the whistle would blow and they'd pull themselves over the edge and up into the attack, spreading out through the trees, if there were any, running for ridges that might give a bit of cover, Johnny and Michael keeping Charlie between them and slightly behind, an unspoken agreement that they'd had since the first attack. Michael knew in these moments that he was part of a line of hundreds of men, Spanish, Scottish, English, Italian, French, German, men from every corner of Europe and beyond, pushing the Fascists back as much as they could, but he didn't feel like part of an army. In the chaos of shells and bullets and grenades and smoke and fire and shouting, it seemed like just him, Charlie and Johnny,



going forward for reasons they couldn't remember, or maybe never knew, going forward into nothing, with nothing at their backs.

Their aim was to gain the peak of the hill. Once they reached the bottom, the scanty shelter afforded by the olive grove came to an end. Among the last trees, Johnny stopped, dropping to his knees.

"It might be an idea to pick off a few of these bastards before we leave the cover of the trees!" he called back to Charlie and Michael. They followed his lead, Michael dropping behind a tree to reload his rifle. He swung the rifle round and peered up the hill. It was difficult to see through the haze but he made out a figure in the grey of the Nationalist uniform, running across the hillside. He took aim carefully and fired, and the figure crumpled to the ground. Another figure came running down the hill and he shot him too. He didn't feel anything, not satisfaction or relief, nor sorrow or guilt; the memory of that first boy in Villanueva de la Canada was very faint now. He just did it and then it was done.

"Johnny!" Charlie's voice was high with panic and Michael looked to see him pointing to a grenade sailing through the air towards them. Johnny caught it, a clean catch, and without hesitating for a moment swung it back up the hill. It exploded in mid air, and they ran upwards to a rocky outcrop under cover of the explosion, Bill and Eddie next to them. The five of them dived behind it and started firing upwards again. The rocks were being chipped away by bullets coming down the hill at them. Michael felt a sudden stinging in his cheek, and put his hand up to his face. When he took his hand away it was covered in blood.

"Are you all right?"

"A bit of rock, I think," Michael shouted.

Another grenade came over the top of the rock but Johnny caught it again and hurled it back. It exploded closer this time, and through the smoke a soldier suddenly pitched over the rocks in front of them. They all yelled with shock. Half his head had been blown away, bright red and glistening grey where there should have been dark hair, but his face was intact, his eyes open. Michael looked along the line and saw Peter running back and forth, waving them upwards.

"We've got the advantage," he was shouting, "move up!"

A high pitched whining filled the air and when Michael looked up he saw waves of planes swooping down through the sky, up and over the hill.

"Look! Look, the bombers are here!" Charlie was staring upwards too, eyes bright.

"Fucking typical!" shouted Johnny, his voice raised over the roar of the engines.

“No, they’re ours! Jesus, there’s hundreds of them!”

“Well that makes a fucking change!”

It seemed the sky was full of them, spinning and diving through the air, and already the explosions could be heard from the other side of the hill, could be felt in the shuddering ground as they ran upwards.

They gained the hilltop that evening, just as the light was changing, hanging somewhere between day and night. The losses of the day had been heavy and the ambulances down at the back of the line were constantly going to and fro. It had been decided to renew the attack at dawn and the five of them were standing on top of the hill, looking down on the town, spread out in front of them. The smell of burning was carried to them by the breeze, and the metallic tang of blood.

“Apparently they’re pretty dug in down there,” said Bill, lighting a cigarette.

“Peter thinks there’ll be a lot of them holed up in houses,” said Charlie.

“Give us a light, eh Bill? I’d say there’ll be a couple of snipers in that tower as well,” said Johnny, catching the matches.

“I know that’s where I’d be if we were defending instead of attacking,” said Michael.

Eddie made a face. “I’d think I’d rather that. Don’t fancy checking those houses.”

Johnny tossed the matches back. “Aye, every time we open a door a Fascist’ll pop out like a fucking jack-in-the-box.”

Charlie shook his head. “No, we’ll win this one for sure. I mean, did you see all those planes earlier? I bet they’ll start the attack tomorrow, bomb the Fascists to fuck.”

“Do you think there are any civilians left down there?” said Michael.

Nobody replied, and Michael wondered if, like him, they were remembering the bombs of Villanueva de la Canada.

Charlie had been right, the planes started the attack at dawn, when they were lined up and ready to go.

“Look at that one!” Charlie was shouting over the sound of the planes, pointing at the town as they made their way down the hill. “I think that was the church. Maybe you won’t have to worry about the snipers in the tower after all, Johnny!”

Johnny was watching, eyes narrowed against the sun, but Michael couldn’t read the expression on his face. There were tanks approaching the town from two sides and companies of soldiers marching behind them. As they reached the outlying houses the formations began

to break up, groups of twos and threes checking the houses. The planes were still howling overhead but shots could be heard through the din. There were men running back and forward, taking cover where they could, pressing themselves against walls to shelter from fire. The five of them went forward together, along a narrow street in single file, walking close to the wall, guns at the ready. Bill nodded to Eddie and they disappeared into a house, as Johnny, Charlie and Michael approached the next one along. Johnny pushed the door open first, and looked back at Michael, nodding slowly. His gun held ready, Michael inched round the doorframe, surveying the room. Suddenly there was a flicker of movement at the corner of the room and a bang. The doorframe splintered and Michael shot blindly into the corner. Fear flooded him and divided him from himself, so that he looked, but didn't see, the slumped soldier in the corner. Every house following that one was the same, every time he opened a door it seemed to him that his head jarred with the sound of a shot and the doorframe would splinter behind him. They worked through the street and the next one, and the next, and in every corner Michael saw slumped soldiers, waiting for him. The day went on but it was all the same, even as they moved through clouds of dust that hung in the air, stinging their eyes, even though the flickering shadows changed and lengthened with the moving sun, it was all the same. At the very end the bells rang out in the tower to let them know the day was theirs, and Charlie ran back up the street to tell the others, and Johnny and Michael walked together down the street and out into the main road where they saw Bill. He was soaked in blood all down his left side, from his collar to his boots. It had spread in long, dark fingers across his chest and stomach, down his trousers. He was carrying Eddie across his shoulders and his face was shining, with tears or sweat, they couldn't tell. He saw the two of them, standing shocked in the road, but his eyes slid over them and back down the street.

"Bill," said Johnny.

He turned towards the sound but his eyes just skittered past them.

"Jesus Christ," said Johnny. He stepped out towards Bill and touched him on the arm.

Bill's eyes focused on him but when he spoke his voice was strange and wild.

"Eddie's been shot, I need to get him to the medical station, there was one just behind the hill, the ambulances were coming and going-"

Eddie's legs jerked and twitched as Bill turned back and forth between the two of them. Michael had no words, speechless at the sight of Eddie's face, the eyes glassy, the skin bloodless. His head hung at a strange angle and as Bill turned Michael saw the source of the blood that had soaked his body. Half of Eddie's neck was missing.

Johnny glanced at Michael and then back at Bill. "He's already dead, Bill." His voice was gentle.

The muscles of Bill's face started to work. "I just need to get him to the medical station--"

"Let me help you." Johnny started lifting the weight of the body off Bill's shoulders. Bill turned to Michael. "He went in first and I didn't want to let him, but he said I'd done it all the other times and it had been fine, but then – but I killed the bastard, and I know if I get him to the medical station--"

Michael stared at him. He didn't even look like himself. His face was crumpled, his neck smeared with blood, his mouth still working, saliva strung in the corners. He looked at Eddie's body. Johnny had lain him down on the side of the road, his hands slick and red. The dust had settled into his wound, the congealed blood was black. Bill crouched down and started to rock back and forwards, his hands over his face. Michael drew his hand down over his own face and looked at Johnny, helpless. Johnny squatted down beside Bill.

"You did the best you could for him," he said.

Bill looked up. All that wildness, that misery that had struggled and fought, had suddenly fallen in on itself and he looked like himself again. He started to cry but this time it was the tears of a brother, not a madman. "What'll I tell my ma?" he said, looking from one to another of them. "What'll I tell my ma?"

"She'll be proud," said Michael, his voice uncertain, "to have a son as brave as Eddie, who laid down his life. For the cause."

Johnny's face hardened and he shook his head. "Here," he said, taking his cigarettes out of his pocket, "have a fag." He offered the packet to Bill but his hands were shaking too badly, so Johnny lit one and passed it to him before lighting one for himself. "You were a good brother to him. Your mam'll be heartbroken, but she'll be happy that you were here with him at the end." He patted him on the back and stood up, walking forward to Michael. He passed him the cigarette, his hand still bloody, and Michael took a draw. They looked up the street together towards the main plaza. The bombs had made their mark, rubble strewn across the road, buildings sagging, homes exposed, here and there just a pile of bricks where once a house had stood. Soldiers picked their way over the rubble, all heading towards the central square, where the bells were still ringing out. The sun was behind them and turned everything a reddish colour, the same colour as the light, the same colour as the dust that still drifted gently across the town. Michael's shadow stretched out before his feet, long and thin

and black, but he looked away from it and up at Johnny. He, too, was looking out over the town.

“Nothing except a battle lost,” he said, almost to himself, “can be half so melancholy as a battle won.”

“What?” said Michael.

“Duke of Wellington,” said Johnny, “after the battle of Waterloo.” He flicked away the end of his cigarette.

“How do you know that?”

Before Johnny replied Charlie came up between them, slinging his arms round their shoulders. “The town’s ours!” he said. His voice was jubilant. “It’s the turning of the tide. We’ll have them running all the way to Portugal. Do you think they’ll give us a drink tonight, Johnny? I’m in the mood for getting pissed!”

Johnny nodded towards Bill, still crouched on the ground, and the body lying behind him.

“What – is that Eddie? What happened?”

Johnny lit another cigarette, and flung away the match with an unexpected ferocity. “I’ll drink to Eddie tonight. But first the dead’ll need to be buried.”

## The First Funeral

When Ana left the theatre she locked the door behind her carefully and put the key into the pocket of the fur coat. She was still wearing it; she hadn't wanted to walk home in her bloodstained dress. People turned to stare at her all the same, with the rich silver fur over her shoulders and her hair tangled and full of dust. But she barely noticed, her thoughts full of what she had to do when she reached her apartment. She would have to clean the bed, lay out Elisa, tell the neighbours she was dead. She felt faint and sick, her stomach churning. She'd waved away the offer of food at the brothel the day before. The thought of eating, of chewing and swallowing, made her shudder.

When she reached her building she went straight up the stairs to her own apartment. She changed her clothes, bundling up the bloodstained dress and stuffing it into the bottom drawer of the dresser. Then she went through to the kitchen, standing at the table and forcing a stale piece of bread down with difficulty. She knew she wouldn't be able to eat after seeing the body. While she was chewing, there was a knock on the door. Pascuala was standing outside. She lived in the apartment opposite Ana and Frasco, a fat, gossipy woman, who delighted in being the bearer of bad news. She brought the news of every Republican defeat to the door, eyes gleaming, scanning Ana's face for a reaction. Ana had raged and agonised and wept in front of Elisa but she was stoical with Pascuala, refusing to allow her the satisfaction of witnessing her tears. She knew that Pascuala would be through every house in the street, telling everyone that the poor abandoned wife of Frasco Barea had been crying on her shoulder. Now she was standing in Ana's door, her face swollen and puffy and her eyes red.

"It's terrible, Ana, have you heard? I've been trying your door all morning and again this afternoon, but there was no answer. Where have you been?"

Ana kept her voice steady as she answered. "I was staying with a friend. What's wrong, Pascuala?"

"It's Elisa. She's been murdered! It's so terrible, the whole building knows about it but nobody knows who did it. These are bad times, Ana, and everybody knows it, but who would have imagined a thing like this?" She lowered her voice and leaned in. "The murderer cut off her hands. Marina told me. She was the one that found her, she went in last night to borrow some tea leaves. What a way for Elisa to go, the poor woman. And her all alone as well, her children scattered all over the four corners of Spain. At a time like this!"

Ana stepped backwards and Pascuala took that as an invitation to come in. She settled herself heavily in the low chair by the stove. Ana remained by the open door.

“Well, the police will have to be notified, and the body laid out,” she said. Her voice seemed to be coming from outside her.

“Oh I’ve already done all that. I’m a good neighbour if nothing else. And Elisa always was so fond of me, I was like a daughter to her.”

Ana’s mouth tightened. Elisa’s opinion of Pascuala had been exactly the same as her own.

“What did the police say?”

“They wrote everything down that I said, but they didn’t seem so interested. They won’t do anything. What do they care about an old woman from La Cueva? If she’d lived on the other side of the river, it might be a different story.”

Ana sighed and put her hands over her face, ashamed of the relief that she felt. But there was anger there too, anger that Pascuala had taken away from her the last thing she could have done for Elisa, when Elisa had done so much for her. She decided that she would still lay the body out. Even though Pascuala had washed and dressed her, Ana would do it with love and guilt and grief and sit by the body until it was time for the funeral.

“Is there anybody with her?”

“There are a few neighbours down there just now.”

“I think I’ll go down.” She laid her hand on the door handle and looked pointedly at Pascuala, but her attention had been caught by the coat, hanging over a chair. In a flash she was out of her seat, running her hands over the fur.

“Have you come into an inheritance? What a coat! How much did it cost you? This would feed the whole street for a month! Lucky you, with money to spend on fur in these hard times.”

“It doesn’t belong to me,” said Ana, crossing the room and pulling the coat from her hands. She pressed it close to her chest.

“Then who does it belong to?” asked Pascuala, still fingering a cuff.

“It’s my sister’s. I borrowed it last night,” said Ana, the lie slipping easily from her throat.

“I thought you stayed with a friend,” said Pascuala, narrowing her eyes.

Ana pulled away, cursing Pascuala’s nosiness, and put the coat in her bedroom. “My sister brought it to my friend’s house,” she called through. “I’m often cold in the night, and she thought I could put it over my bed.”

“A blanket would have done, no?” said Pascuala. “I suppose you’re still not used to sleeping alone. Have you heard from Frasco at all?”

“I’m going down to Elisa,” said Ana, coming back through, unsmiling.

“Poor Elisa. It’s a terrible thing, right enough,” said Pascuala, following her out of the door.

“Has the funeral been arranged?” Ana asked as they walked down the stairs.

“Yes, it’s tomorrow morning, at Santa María,” Pascuala replied. “But I don’t know who we’ll get to carry the coffin, with all the men away in the army or in prison, and no money to pay pallbearers.”

“I’ll do it,” said Ana.

“No, Ana, you can’t!” said Pascuala breathlessly. “It would be a terrible scandal. A woman carrying the coffin! How people would talk!”

Ana turned on her fiercely. “Well there’s no men to carry it, Pascuala, you said it yourself. The only one that would talk about it is you.”

Pascuala looked hurt. “Well I’m sure I wouldn’t have a problem with it. I just thought-”

“Well I don’t care what you think,” said Ana, continuing down the stairs. After a pause Pascuala said, “Well, you’re upset dear. Don’t worry about me.” As Ana reached Elisa’s landing Teresa came out of the door. She looked at Ana but her eyes said nothing, and she didn’t speak, she just kept walking.

In the event Ana did carry the coffin the next day, along with five other women from the street. Despite their youth, they were not strong, reduced by war and poverty, but Elisa weighed so little that Ana, washing and dressing the body, had been able to lift her in her arms like a child, and so they were able to carry the coffin out of the church to the cart without too much difficulty. The funeral had been attended mainly by women, all in black like a coven of witches, the hymns sung in high, sweet tones, the prayers said in a pious feminine murmur. The sonorous voice of the priest intoning the Latin Mass had been the only male sound. When Ana arrived home from the cemetery, Isabella was waiting for her, her face pale and her eyes red. Ana knew what she was going to say before the words came out of her mouth.

“Mama’s dead.” Isabella nodded and Ana put her arms around her as she sobbed into her shoulder.

“When?”



“This morning. Well, we found – found her this morning, but she was already cold.” Ana felt her heart cracking inside her, and wondered how much more she could bear. If she could cry it might be better but her chest felt like a pressure valve, bursting with emotion that she had no way of expressing.

“When’s the funeral?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“Is Mama still at home?”

“Yes. But...” Isabella’s voice trailed away.

“But I’m not welcome there.”

Isabella shook her head and Ana looked down. She suddenly felt exhausted.

“You’re very thin, Anacita.”

Ana shrugged her shoulders and said, “It’s the black, it makes everybody seem thinner. So now we’re orphans. Strange to think, eh?” Isabella nodded and looked upwards, her eyes filling again with tears. Ana regretted her words.

“I’d better go,” Isabella said. “I should get back to Aurelia. She’s in bits. Will you be all right, alone here?”

“I’ll be fine, Isabella. Will you?”

“You should come with me and Pedro to the funeral. Come to the house beforehand, we’ll go together.”

“No, it’s fine,” Ana said. “I don’t want to impose.”

“Please, Ana. It will make it easier for me.”

Ana nodded slowly. “Very well. I’ll be there in the morning.”

Isabella stooped to put her arms around her. Ana could feel the pressure of her arms but not the warmth of her flesh, and she closed her eyes, overcome with grief for her mother, for Elisa, and for herself.

After Isabella left, Ana walked around her apartment picking things up, lying on her bed, sitting on the balcony. She couldn’t settle to anything. Every time she was still, the silence in the apartment filled her ears like the roaring of the sea. The sounds of the street below seemed very distant and only served to heighten her feeling of isolation. She decided to go out walking. She needed to keep moving, keep doing something. She changed out of her black dress and put her boots back on.

It was warm outside. The beginning of autumn was usually marked by the cooling of the days but the heat was an oppressive blanket over the streets. Ana crossed the river and walked into the city centre. She turned away from the street that led to the military headquarters, shivering, and instead walked down into the centre of the old town. Here the streets were narrower and the buildings taller, and it was cooler to walk there, in the shade. She walked without direction, allowing her feet to take her where they wanted, passing small, dark-windowed shops, bars, restaurants, pawn shops and bakeries, their meagre goods displayed in the windows. Many shops were closed, their wooden shutters folded out over the windows and locked, but enough remained open to prevent the ghostly atmosphere that had settled like a shroud over the artists' quarter. The streets grew gradually busier as the day cooled, flower sellers, housewives, maids, errand boys, nuns, soldiers and beggars all keeping Ana company as she walked in circles. She passed along narrow cobblestoned streets that twisted upwards to the cathedral, through plazas with weatherbeaten fountains in their centre, past churches with cool marble floors and their wooden doors open, revealing a glimpse of the dim interiors. Before long she found herself walking down the street where her father's tailoring shop had been. She glanced up at the first floor windows, where their apartment had been, but they were dark, with faded curtains hanging at their sides. After Isabella was married, Ana's mother had gone to live with Aurelia and Manuel. Ana had refused to stay there and had found her own apartment near the theatre. Her mother wouldn't speak to her for two months afterwards, horrified by the idea of her daughter living alone. The memory made Ana smile slightly as she approached the shop window, peering inside for any signs of life. It was empty and there was a metal grille over the door, secured with a rusty padlock. The sight of the shop made Ana sad. The hours that she'd spent here had brought her closer to her father than either of her sisters. Ana had come to help him in the shop when she was fifteen. Her mother had protested, not wishing a daughter of hers to go out to work, but her father had been a liberal man, and had been glad of the help.

"It'll do her good, amor mio," he'd said, leaning down and kissing her mother who'd been sitting by the windows in the parlour upstairs, sewing a lace collar on to Aurelia's dress. "It'll teach her the value of money, and give her a skill in the likely case that we won't find anyone willing to marry her."

Her mother had smiled tightly as Ana had protested, laughing.

"I just don't like the idea of a daughter of mine going out to work, Carlos. And especially in a tailors. What will people think?"

“I’m a tailor,” he said, winking at Ana over her mother’s head. “What do people think of me?”

“You know that it’s different.”

“Well I could use the help, novia. My eyes are getting old and it’s harder for me to keep the accounts. Besides, Ana herself has told me that she’s bored sitting around at home.”

Her mother flashed an accusing glance at Ana, and she flushed, looking down guiltily. “Very well,” she said in a grudging tone. “But I’m not happy about it.”

Ana, however, had been delighted. At first her father had only permitted her to sit behind the counter, welcoming customers and keeping the books, but before long she’d persuaded him to start teaching her how to cut cloth, how to measure a customer, how to operate the sewing machine. After six months she made him a suit and he was so well pleased with it he started allowing her to help him with the customers’ orders. It was Ana’s idea to expand their services to women. She’d buy French magazines and copy the designs, adding some ideas of her own, and persuade the men who came to the shop to buy skirts and wraps for their wives. Soon the women were coming of their own accord and Ana’s father took over the lease of the shop next door, which was closing down. They’d worked together for three years before he died and then Ana had resentfully gone back to sitting in the house with her mother and sisters all day long. Her mother wouldn’t hear of Ana running the shop alone.

“It was different when you were helping Papa,” she’d said, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief, “but no daughter of mine will be known as a working woman.”

A while later Ana had met Gregorio Rodríguez, a customer of her father’s, in the street one day. She’d made a suit for him shortly before her father’s death that he’d been delighted with. He’d recognised her and they’d spent ten minutes chatting.

“So what are you doing these days, Ana?”

“Oh, nothing,” she’d said, trying to conceal her frustrated tone.

“Hmmm,” he’d said, tapping his chin with his forefinger. “You know, the theatre where I work is looking for a seamstress.”

“What would that involve?”

“Well, you’d draw up patterns from the costume designs and make them to the measurements of the actors, and clean them during the show run, if they needed it, and generally maintain the wardrobe. Are you interested?”

“Of course!” Ana could hardly keep the excitement from her voice.

“Well I’ll mention your name to Alejandro, the artistic director. In fact, why don’t you come in tomorrow morning for a chat?”

“That would be wonderful, Señor Rodríguez. It’s the Ciudadanos, isn’t it?”

“Yes my dear that’s right, on Calle Mascarilla. Just ask for me at stage door, Arturo will send you up.”

“Thank you so much Señor Rodríguez.”

“Not at all. I’ll see you tomorrow my dear.”

It all seemed so long ago. Standing outside her father’s old shop, her hand curled round one of the dull metal rails, she searched inside her for the fifteen year old who had started work here, or the eighteen year old who had locked the door for the last time, or the nineteen year old that had turned up at the theatre as requested, her blood racing through her veins with excitement, but she could find no trace of them. Leaning her head against the grille, Ana closed her eyes and tried to summon the past, to surround herself with it, but since her first meeting with the captain it had become more and more difficult for her to escape into her memories. A voice interrupted her reverie.

“Señorita Ana! It is, isn’t it?”

Ana raised her head and looked to see who was addressing her. By her side, beaming into her face, was Angel, an garrulous old man who worked at a bar around the corner, delivering coffees to various shops. Ana had known him ever since she was a little girl. She used to see him from the parlour windows, a tray held high above his head on which rested tiny cups of strong black coffee, calling greetings to friends and customers as he threaded his way through the streets.

“Hola Angel, cómo va? How’s your family?”

“I’m well, Señorita Ana. And my oldest boy, Gabriel, you remember him? He’s a corporal in the army! He’s on leave just now. When he arrived at the door in his uniform, I almost didn’t know him, he looked so smart!”

Gabriel had been a friend of hers, a snub nosed boy with dirty knees and a wide grin. They’d all played together as children, running through the streets, playing football in the plaza, daring each other to run inside the church opposite the fountain and touch the altar. She remembered one summer day, when the heat had been oppressive. The ball they’d been playing with had gone into the fountain and suddenly, all inspired by the same idea, they’d jumped into the fountain, shrieking and splashing in the clear water, Gabriel kicking the water up in an arc, the sunlight catching the spray. And now he was a soldier. He could have been the one who captured Frasco. He could have killed him, quite easily. She tuned back in to Angel’s chatter.

“And Emilia’s been a little poorly ever since last winter, but she’s getting stronger now. How are your family?”

Ana could feel the tears blocking her throat and hear them in her voice when she spoke. “My sisters are well-”

“Isabella and – and – wait, I’ll get it in a minute. Assunta?”

“Aurelia.”

“Yes, Aurelia, that’s right. You were such pretty little chicas, all three of you in those matching dresses at Mass on Sundays, with ribbons in your hair. And your mother, how’s she getting on?”

“She died, just – just last night.”

Angel’s face screwed up with sympathy, and he put his hand on Ana’s upper arm. “I’m sorry to hear that, Señorita Ana, I really am. Your mother was a good woman, very kind to me always. I remember that year that Gabriel was in the hospital, your mother gave Emilia a pair of boots so she could walk to visit him, even in the snow.”

Ana nodded, looking down at her hands.

“When is the funeral? I would like to go, pay my respects.”

“It’s the day after tomorrow, at San Lorenzo.”

“That’s the one next to the river, isn’t it?”

Ana nodded. It was the church her mother had been baptised in, the church where she’d made her first communion, her confirmation. Her parents had been married there too. She lifted her left hand to her face and drew it across her eyes, rubbing her cheek in a gesture of weariness. Perhaps seeing the sadness in her face, Angel changed the subject, pointing at her wedding ring.

“I didn’t know you were married now, Señorita Ana. How long have you been married for?”

“Four years,” Ana said, trying to summon a smile for the old man.

“Well, at least you’re not alone, at a time like this,” Angel said.

“My husband’s away fighting.”

“He is? What’s his name? Maybe my Gabriel knows him, eh? Imagine, wouldn’t that be strange?”

“Frasco Barea.” There was a pause. Ana looked at Angel.

“Don’t worry, Anacita,” he said, reverting back to his name for her when she was a child. “We’re winning. He’ll be home soon.”

Ana nodded, smiling painfully.

“Well anyway I should go. These coffees will be cold! Business is bad, but there’s enough to keep me busy, all the same. It was nice to see you, Ana, and I’ll see you at San Lorenzo.”

She nodded again and raised her hand in farewell. “I’ll see you there Angel.”

He hurried away down the street and Ana looked up again at the windows of her childhood home. She felt more alone than ever.

Aragon, December 1937

They'd built a bonfire earlier in the day and it was roaring away now. Every so often someone would chuck on a bit of wood from the pile outside the circle, the flames reaching greedily for each new piece. The army had been stationed on these mountains for so long that the hills were stripped almost bare; it had taken them three days to collect a reasonable amount of wood, ranging further and further down the mountain. On one of these expeditions they'd come across an abandoned farmhouse. Johnny had kicked the door in but there hadn't been much inside; a few sticks of furniture, which they'd broken up for firewood. Michael had felt a brief stab of compunction at the thought of the owner returning, but then, he reasoned, these hills had been a front since the start of the war. The householders were long gone, and when the rug snagged on a chair leg and pulled away, revealing a trapdoor, Michael barely hesitated before opening it. Inside he'd found a bottle, full of a thick, golden liquid which shone when held up to the cold winter light.

"Brandy," said Johnny after taking a sip. "Ya beauty!"

"Let's save it for New Year's Eve," said Charlie, his face lit up with excitement.

"Where am I going to hide a bottle of brandy for two days but?"

"We'll bury it," said Johnny, "near the camp, and then we can dig it up on the night, and bring in 1938 with a bang."

They were planning to dig it up later but for now the company was all assembled round the fire, the flames roasting their faces and knees, even though their backs were frozen.

"What time is it?" asked Charlie. He was sitting between Michael and Johnny.

"I don't know, for Christ's sake stop asking, it's not even close to midnight yet."

"Not too long to go," said George. He was the new political commissar. Peter had been made company commander a couple of months ago and George had arrived to fill his old position. Michael didn't like him much. He probably wouldn't have minded him a year ago but with everything he'd seen since then, he struggled with George's unquestioning belief in the party line. He understood the need for united leadership, especially in war time, but George's palpable disapproval when Bill talked about agrarian reform and collectives made him uneasy. And he'd been asking questions about the people who hadn't signed up to the Party, who grumbled about the generals. Michael took a drink of wine from the bottle between his feet. Maybe he was more cynical than he used to be. He'd become aware of it over the last couple of months, a disillusionment, he'd tried to ignore it but it kept creeping

back, a numbness around the edges of his mind. He no longer believed they would win the war. He didn't see how they could.

"Who were you named after, Michael?" Charlie's voice broke into his thoughts.

"What?"

"Who were you named after when you were born?"

"I was named after my mam's brother," said Michael. "I never met him, he died when I was just a wean."

"What happened him?" asked Johnny, lighting a cigarette.

"He was in the Irish Republican Army. He was executed by the British."

"My dad fought in Ireland." Harry's voice was cold.

Michael looked up and realised that a couple of the men were staring at him.

"He couldn't get a job when he came back from France so he went over there. Survived four years of the Great War and then got blown up by some savages."

"They're nothing but troublemakers, these IRA men," said George. "They came over here, started causing trouble in the British Battalion, saying they're not going to take orders from the Brits."

"So who are they fighting with?" said Johnny.

"They joined the Americans."

"It's not that different to this war, you know," Michael said.

"What do you mean?" asked Bill.

"Rich landlords exploiting peasants. There were people thrown off the land they'd farmed for years, turned out into the road."

There was a moment of silence.

"So that's why he joined the IRA?" asked Johnny.

"Aye, for the same reason I came here," said Michael. "He believed in the cause of the downtrodden." He realised that he'd spoken in the past tense but before he could dwell on it Johnny spoke again. "How about you, Charlie?"

"What?"

"Who are you named after?"

"My dad named me after Marx."

"Oh aye, old Charlie Marx, I knew him well," said Johnny. They all laughed.

"Karl Marx," said Charlie. "But they called me Charlie for short. Even though the war had been over for a year when I was born, my mam thought Karl sounded too German, all the same, so she started calling me Charlie and everyone else did too."



“We were all named after family members, not politicians,” said Peter.

“When Kathleen – my sister – had the twins, she named them after characters from a fairytale. Conn and Fiachra, they’re called.”

“What kind of a name is Fiachra?” asked George.

“It’s an Irish name,” said Michael, “she named them after the twin brothers from the story of Niamh and Cuchulainn. It was Kathleen’s favourite story when she was wee.”

“Neev and what?”

“It’s an Irish story, my mam used to tell us it when we were kids, the story of Niamh and Cuchulainn.” That was always how she’d started the story off, sitting upright in the middle of Kathleen and Nora’s bed, her back against the wall. She’d undo the scarf around her head and pull her hair over her shoulder. Michael and Nora would lean against her sides, Kathleen and Manus and Edward sitting at the bottom of the bed. Manus would get bored, start fidgeting, there wasn’t enough action for him in Niamh and Cuchulainn. He preferred the story of the Sons of Tureen, the story of Brian, Urchar and Iuchar and their quest. There were more battles in it. But on evenings when it was Kathleen’s choice, she always picked Niamh and Cuchulainn. She’d sit at the bottom of the bed, eyes bright and fixed on their mam. Michael always remembered those evenings, the softness of his mam’s side, her hair tickling the side of his face, her hands moving before him as she recited the stories they’d all heard so many times.

“Go on then,” said Charlie.

“What?”

“Tell us the story.”

“Aye, tell us the story, Mickey.”

“I will not.”

“Come on,” said Harry, who was sitting next to Johnny. “We need to find some way of keeping Charlie entertained until midnight.”

Michael took a long drink of wine. “Do you really want to hear it? It’s not that exciting, no romance, no battles.”

“Think we’ve had about enough of battles for one year,” said Johnny. “Go on.”

Michael looked around. Most of the men had turned towards their conversation. He caught Peter’s eye and he nodded.

“Aye, all right then.”

They settled down to hear the story, stretching their legs out, pulling their collars up, making sure they had their drinks and cigarettes to hand. Bill reached behind him and banked

up the fire and in the sudden flare Michael saw a circle of expectant faces. He summoned up his mam's words, and began.

"Niamh was an Irish princess, one of the Tuatha de Danaan. When she was five, her mam gave birth to twins, Conn and Fiachra, but she died in childbirth. A few years later, their da was killed on a hunt, and so Niamh, Conn and Fiachra all grew up together in their court in the south of the country. They missed their da and mam, but the warriors of the court protected them and their da's advisers helped them to rule, and their small kingdom was peaceful and happy, and the people there lived in innocence and hope. As the years passed Conn and Fiachra grew to be fine warriors and fair princes. Niamh was known for her kindness and mercy, but above all for her beauty, and bards up and down the country sang of her face. Many suitors came to the court but Niamh turned them all down. She was happy there in her home with her brothers and had no wish to marry. One day a Druid called Cuchulainn came to the court, seeking Niamh's hand. He presented himself before the princess and the two princes, bowed down low and said, "Love enters through the eyes, and your beauty has bewitched me." He was old and crooked, and Niamh stepped forward and took his arm.

"There is no need to bow before us," she said, for even though she had no wish to marry Cuchulainn, she didn't like to see an old man on his knees.

With her help he raised himself up and said, "Love reveals itself through the hands, and your touch has bewitched me."

Niamh stepped back, to beside her brothers. She looked at them and shook her head.

"We cannot grant your suit," said Fiachra, and Conn nodded.

"Our sister belongs with us."

The Druid looked up at them, and Niamh felt fear prickling her skin at the sight of his eyes. His voice was still respectful, but there was a warning in his eyes as he said, "Love lives in the heart, and your heart will be mine."

Niamh shook her head. "I am sorry," she said. "Thank you, but I must refuse," and when he heard those words Cuchulainn spat on the ground and swept out of the court in a rage.

As the weeks went on Fiachra and Conn soon forgot about Cuchulainn, one of the many suitors that their sister had rejected. But Niamh had uneasy dreams that she couldn't shake, and stayed close to her brothers. A couple of months after Cuchulainn's visit, reports came in of a wild boar in the forest, and the brothers decided to form a hunting party.

"Please don't go," said Niamh, on the morning of their departure.

“We’ll only be gone a few days, Niamh,” said Fiachra.

“Don’t worry,” said Conn. “We’ll bring home the boar and have a feast that will last for a week!”

The day after they left Niamh was alone in her garden when she heard a noise behind her. She turned to see the old Druid, Cuchulainn.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

Cuchulainn held out his hand to her. “Come with me and be my bride.”

“I will not,” said Niamh.

He followed her and harassed her until, maddened by his persistence, Niamh said the most hurtful thing she could think of. “I won’t marry you, Cuchulainn, I want a man who is fine to my eyes.”

He put his wrinkled face next to hers. “Well, if you don’t like to look on me, then you shan’t look on anyone,” he said, and he plucked out her eyes and escaped over the garden walls.

The next day he came back. Niamh had ordered the doors barred, but the locks were no match for his magic.

“Who is there?” said Niamh, turning her face towards the sound of his entrance. “I said nobody but my brothers, on their return, should be allowed to enter.”

“It is me,” said Cuchulainn, and Niamh shrank back at the sound of his voice. He took hold of her and said, “Come with me and be my bride.”

But despite Niamh’s fear, she was of the Tuatha de Danaan, and so she lifted up her head and said, “I will not.” She pushed his wrinkled hands off her and said, “I won’t marry you, Cuchulainn, I want a man with flesh fine to touch.”

“Well if you don’t like my touch, you shan’t touch anything,” he said, and he cut off her hands and walked out of the door.

The next day he came back. “Look at the famous beauty Niamh now,” he sneered when he saw her, sitting in the shadows, her arms hidden under a cloak, a scarf pulled forward over her head. “I’d say you won’t have much choice now, princess, for no one else will have you. So, come with me and be my bride.”

Even mutilated and blind, Niamh was too proud for his bullying, and she said, “I will not. I’ll never marry you, Cuchulainn, because I’ll never love you.”

“If you won’t love me, you’ll never love anyone,” he said, and he tore out her heart and vanished.

Fiachra and Conn came back two days later, dragging the giant body of the boar behind them triumphantly. But when they reached the palace the servants were all crying and the guards were pale. “What has happened?” Fiachra demanded. They were shown to Niamh’s chamber.

“Niamh?” said Conn. “What is wrong?”

She turned her face towards the sound of her brothers’ voices, and when they saw the dark hollows where her eyes used to be they gasped.

“Who – who has done this to you?” said Fiachra.

“Cuchulainn,” said Niamh, bowing her head.

“Where is he?” said Conn, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I’ll cut his head off with one blow.”

“No,” said Niamh, and she reached out to them. They fell back in shock when they saw the stumps at the end of her arms where her hands used to be.

“Your hands,” said Fiachra. “I’ll find him and stone him like the dog he is.”

“No!” said Niamh. “He is too powerful. He will kill you both.”

“I’ll give him my eyes in exchange for yours,” said Conn.

“And I’ll give him my hands,” said Fiachra. “And then you’ll be restored.”

Niamh shook her head, and the movement caused her robe to fall open, and they both saw the gaping hole where her heart used to be, and they realised there was nothing they could do, for she was beyond saving. And they saw the danger of beauty, and the destructive power that lies at the heart of men’s desire.”

When Michael finished speaking he realised how dry his throat was, and as the group clapped him he reached for his wine again, embarrassed.

“That was brilliant!” said Charlie, his face flushed with the heat of the fire. “I’ve never heard that story before. What happened to Cuchulainn?”

“What do you mean?”

“What happened to him in the story?”

“I don’t know,” said Michael. “I suppose he got away with it.”

“I liked it, but it’s not exactly a happy ending.”

“Who still believes in happy endings?” Bill said to himself.

Michael glanced across at him.

“Well told, Mickey,” said Johnny.

“Yes, well told indeed,” said George. He seemed a little drunk. “There’s an essential truth in these old folk tales that can be applied to many situations now.”

“And there was me thinking it was just a story for children,” whispered Charlie, grinning at Michael.

“In this story, for example, the character of Niamh can be compared to the people of Spain-”

“Och away and shite, George,” said Johnny. “Nobody’s in the mood for a political speech.”

“Seems to me, comrade, that you’re never in the mood for a political speech,” said George, staring at Johnny.

“Aye, and what?”

“It’s just I sometimes ask myself what you’re doing here in Spain at all.”

“And?” said Johnny, his voice level.

“Well you don’t seem to be particularly politically motivated, in fact I’d say you’re a bad influence on some of the men. Charlie here was a fine Communist, but he’s not been as vocal as he was. Michael too.”

“I signed up as an anti-fascist, not a Communist,” said Michael.

George ignored him. “Maybe you came here for some other reason. Running out on a bad debt, were you? Or maybe you got a girl in trouble?”

Johnny stood up, accidentally knocking Charlie’s wine over.

“Leave it, George,” said Peter, but he kept on.

“Or maybe we’ve got a Trotskyist in our midst.”

“For Christ’s sake George, leave it alone, will you?” Peter repeated.

“Why, are you in on it too?”

“In on what?” Peter said.

“Spying for the Fascists.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” said Bill.

“Why don’t you tell us the real reason you’re here then Johnny?” George said.

Johnny just looked at him, his eyes cold, not a hint of a smile on his face.

Peter stood up, hands outstretched. “Johnny’s a fine soldier, George, he’s proved himself time and again in the year that he’s been here. I don’t know why you’re throwing these wild accusations about.”

Johnny spat on the ground. “Don’t worry about it Peter.” He turned and stepped over the log he’d been sitting on, out of the circle of light thrown by the fire.

“You shouldn’t be getting involved, Peter,” said George. “You’re not the political commissar any more, you know.”

“Fuck off George,” said Peter. “It’s New Year’s Eve, for fuck’s sake. Give us a break, eh?”

Michael looked over and met Charlie’s eye. Charlie jerked his head back in the direction Johnny had taken and Michael nodded.

“Just don’t forget there’s no difference in rank between the company commander and the political commissar, Peter, so don’t act like you’re my superior. And it’s our duty to root out spies and traitors. Look at what happened with the POUM, after all...”

Michael and Charlie slipped away from the fire and George’s voice faded behind them. Michael turned his collar up and put his hands in his pockets.

“What an arsehole,” said Charlie.

“Are they all like that?”

“Who?”

“Communists.”

“Like what?”

“So fucking paranoid.”

Charlie shrugged. “It seems the ones over here are. Where do you think Johnny went?”

“Any money he’s digging up that bottle of brandy as we speak.”

Charlie laughed. “Probably.” There was a pause, the crunching of their boots against the ground suddenly loud, the noise from the fire getting fainter and fainter. “Do you think it could be true, what George said about Johnny?”

“I don’t think Johnny even knows what a Trotskyist is,” said Michael. “I’m not a Communist, does that make me suspect? To be honest I think George is full of shite.”

They walked in silence until they reached the end of the camp. Johnny was sitting with his back against the trunk, the bottle of brandy in his hand. He looked up as they approached.

“Alright lads?”

They sat down on either side of him and he passed the bottle round.

“You okay, Johnny?” said Charlie.

“I’m fine,” said Johnny. “I’ve just been looking at the stars. They’re bright tonight. Here, Mickey, have some of this.”

Michael took a drink of the brandy. It burned its way down into his stomach. He tipped his head back. The last time he'd really looked at the stars was the night in Jarama, on watch with Charlie. It was only seven months ago but it seemed like years.

"If you look at them for long enough," said Johnny, "you realise that none of this matters. Whether we win or lose, whether we live or die, nothing we do really matters in the end up."

"What do you mean, if we lose?" said Charlie. "Do you think we'll lose?"

"What do I know?" said Johnny. "What do any of us know? It's not like we're told anything about what's going on. Had you even heard of these mountains before we got moved here? Do you even know which direction Madrid is in?"

"No," said Charlie.

"Me neither," said Johnny. "They don't tell us a fucking thing." Johnny passed Michael the brandy and he took a swig.

"When I look at the stars," Michael said, "it always makes me think of the world turning. You notice it more during the day, with the movement of the sun, but you never think on it too long, you're always busy. But even at night, we're moving, even when you think you're still you're not, you're always moving, always getting pulled into a new day, even if you don't want to be." He passed the bottle to Charlie. "Even if you want to stay where you are."

"Or pulled into a new year," said Charlie, taking another drink. "I wonder what time it is?"

"If I had a shilling for every time you've said that tonight, I'd be rich enough to buy arms for the whole People's Army," said Johnny. "It's not midnight yet, anyway. I'm not pissed enough."

"Where were you this time last year?" said Michael.

Charlie smiled. "I was in the house with my mam and dad. There were loads of people round, all my aunts and uncles and cousins, and half the neighbours. Gwennie was there too. My mam and her spent half the night crying cos they knew I'd be off to Spain a week later once I turned eighteen."

"I was out on the lash with the boys," said Johnny. "We were up the town but we came back down the road to first foot some of the neighbours. There were a few parties in the street that night."

“Me and my da and my brothers went to the pub early for a few pints, then back to the house, half the pub ended up coming with us but. It was a good night, the singing started after the bells and the party was still going when the sun came up.”

They lapsed into silence, the same thought on all of their minds. The bottle was passed round a few more times. Michael was starting to feel drunk. He concentrated on the trunk at his back, the cold ground underneath him, he needed something to anchor him to the ground. His head was spinning, too much wine and brandy, too many stars in the sky. Charlie suddenly toppled over, the ground was steep and he rolled over a couple of times before coming to a halt. Johnny stood up, holding the trunk of the tree for support, and made his way down to Charlie in large, unsteady strides.

“On your feet, comrade,” he said, his voice loud, and reached down to pull Charlie up, but in the process he lost his balance and fell over too.

Suddenly Michael heard the sound of cheering from the direction of the fire and further away, the distant pop of gunfire. A loud and out of tune chorus of Auld Lang Syne started up and Johnny and Charlie staggered to their feet, shaking one another’s hands. Johnny gave Charlie a hug, clapping him on the back, and then held out his hand to Michael.

“Happy new year Mickey,” he said, shaking his hand.

“Aye, here’s to 1938,” Michael replied, turning to Charlie and shaking his hand.

“Here’s to the year we’ll win the war!” said Charlie, holding up the brandy in a toast. Michael met Johnny’s eyes as they passed the bottle round but neither of them said anything.



## The Inheritance

Ana knocked at the door, and after a couple of minutes it opened.

"I know I was here just the other day, and I'm sorry to be back so soon," she said, looking down. "I just – I feel so lonely, and when I'm alone my head fills up with fear until I'm ready to go mad."

"Sister, you know that you're always welcome," Mercedes said, drawing Ana in through the door. She took her through to the salon and they sat down. Ana could see Marguerita in the courtyard with a broom in her hand, moving through rows of pink and red sheets hung out to dry. Luisa came through from the kitchen. "Holy Maria, you look terrible!"

Mercedes glanced at her. "Things are difficult for Ana just now, Luisa."

She shrugged, shifting the vase she was carrying to the other hip. "Times are hard on everyone." She carried on through the salon and went up the stairs. Her footsteps could be heard overhead as she moved from one room to another.

"There's a group of officers just back from the front," Mercedes explained, "and they're coming here tonight. Luisa has been getting everything ready for them. She's managed to persuade the general to give her some wine and some food for them, but we've already eaten all the best bits." She grinned. "In fact, I could steal you a little bit. Wait here."

She came back after a couple of minutes and pushed a small parcel into Ana's hands.

"New bread, a piece of chorizo, and an orange."

Ana smiled despite herself. "An orange?" She hadn't seen one since the start of the war.

Mercedes nodded. "Quick, hide it under your skirt so Luisa doesn't see it."

Ana tucked it into the pocket of her skirt. A moment later Antonia came through the door, making eyes at Mercedes, with Luisa at her back hurrying her along.

"Mercedes, you don't have time to be sitting there like a lady of leisure. There's a lot to do."

"What would you like me to do, Luisa?"

"Go and get yourself washed, for a start. There's still water up in the room. We need to get those sheets back on the beds as soon as they dry and this room has to be swept and tidied. I won't have that general coming here and finding a bunch of faded sluts in a hovel. If tonight goes well we might get more of their business. This isn't random soldiers turning up and getting their fun without paying, you know. These are important men and this is a proper

organised party, and the only reason we're getting the business is because that witch Madame Boisseau and her tarts have all come down with influenza. It has to go well tonight, do you understand me?"

"All right, all right," said Mercedes, holding up her hands. She turned to Ana. "Would you help me wash my hair?"

"Of course," said Ana, rising from her chair, taking care to keep the parcel concealed. She followed Mercedes out of the room and up the stairs.

As she washed Mercedes' hair she told her about the events of the last couple of days.

"You know sister, I thought of something after you left the other day," Mercedes said, twisting her head round slightly so that she could look upwards at Ana.

"What was that?"

"Are you still determined to..." She paused before continuing, searching for the right words. "To go and see the captain again?"

"Yes," said Ana, her voice steady and resolved.

Mercedes sighed. "Are you sure Ana? Have you really thought about it?"

"Frasco would do it for me, Mercedes. I know he would. They'll execute him if I don't. Don't try to change my mind. It makes it easier if I'm not reminded that I have a choice."

"Well, I was wondering, have you thought about what will happen when Frasco is back? You can't stay here, you'll have to go east."

"Why?" asked Ana.

"Because if you stay here it won't be long before Frasco will be arrested or worse. They'll know that he was fighting for the Republicans. It won't be safe for either of you here."

"But Teresa... She – her husband was fighting for the Republic and he's back home."

"They didn't leave?"

"No, he just hides in the house. Nobody knows he's there."

"How long will they be able to keep that up? The city's full of informers."

Ana hadn't even considered it but Mercedes was right. She'd have to leave her home, the city she'd grown up in, the streets she knew so well. But the thought didn't cause her as much pain as it would have done before the war. With Frasco away and the theatre shut, all her former friends at war or in prison, her mother and Elisa dead, she was more or less alone, apart from Mercedes and Isabella.

“But how will we go east? We can’t travel across the country. How will we cross the front lines?”

Mercedes nodded, her eyes sharp and thoughtful. “No, to walk straight back into Franco’s army would be madness. I’ve heard a thing here and there about a fisherman down at the port. At the very start of the war he was hired by some men to take them round the coast to Barcelona. But when the army took over the city he refused to do it anymore, said it was too dangerous.”

“Won’t he be away fighting?”

“No, I think he still fishes. A lot of the peasants and fishermen were left to their work. Armies need feeding, after all.”

“But how will I persuade him to take me?”

“Maybe you could pay him. I don’t know,” Mercedes said, closing her eyes against rivulets of water as Ana rinsed her hair.

“Do you know his name?”

“I don’t remember it but I’ll ask Antonia. That’s how her fiancé managed to get to Barcelona.”

“Julian?”

“Yes. How did Frasco get there?”

“He went across country, as far as I know, with other men from the theatre and from the street. They left on the 19<sup>th</sup>, the day after the rising.”

There was a pause, the noise of the water mingling with the heavy footsteps of Luisa and the complaints of Antonia as she followed her across the landing. Marguerita began to sing in the courtyard. Her thin, sweet voice floated in through the open window.

“Mercedes, will you come with me to my mother’s funeral?” Ana asked abruptly. Mercedes sat up and turned around. She put her arms around Ana and hugged her once, quickly. Her wet hair soaked the side of Ana’s face and the shoulder of her dress.

“Of course I will. Just tell me when and where, and I’ll be there.”

“It’s the day after tomorrow, if you’re not busy...I know that we don’t know one another very well, but I know I’ll feel safer with you there. I don’t know why.”

“Don’t worry sister,” Mercedes said, looking back at her. “I understand what it’s like to feel alone.”

“Mercedes! Are you not finished yet? There’s a world of work that needs doing down here.” Luisa’s voice was sharp with impatience.

Ana stood up. “I’d better go. I think I’m in the way here.”

Mercedes nodded. "I'm sorry, sister. But I'll come to the funeral. Where is it?"

"San Lorenzo. You know, the church with the convent attached?"

"Yes, I know it. Next to the river, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the one."

Mercedes walked her down to the door. "You're a strong person, sister," she said at the door, holding Ana's shoulders and looking into her eyes. She sighed and looked away before continuing. "Just remember that when you feel despairing."

Ana managed a smile. "Thank you Mercedes."

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

As the door shut behind Ana she took the parcel of food out from under her skirt and held it against her chest. She glanced at the sky. It was getting close to curfew, and with a sigh she turned her steps homewards.

When she arrived at her building and walked up the stairs, she noticed that Elisa's door was ajar. She considered going on her way, afraid that there was a relative inside, but then she heard Pascuala's voice coming through the doorway. She pushed open the door and looked inside. Marina, the downstairs neighbour, Pascuala, and another woman she didn't recognise were sifting through piles of clothes and sheets. The cupboards that Ana had cleaned out and tidied with so much care were all empty, their contents in piles on Elisa's bed and on the floor. To Ana the three women looked exactly like the rats that could be seen down by the river in the summer, picking over the flotsam and jetsam washed up on the river bank.

"What are you doing?" she said, her voice sharp.

Pascuala looked up and smiled ingratiatingly. "Ana, buenas noches. This is Sofia, my niece."

"What are you doing in here?" she repeated. She knew her tone was brusque but she didn't care.

The smile vanished from Pascuala's face. "We're sorting through Elisa's things. She doesn't need them anymore," she replied in an equally sharp tone. The two other women looked at one another, their eyebrows raised.

"She was only put in the ground this morning, for Christ's sake. Couldn't you have waited until tomorrow at least?"

"And risk the landlord turning up and throwing it all away? That's nothing but a waste."

“So instead you’re here, with people who didn’t even know Elisa,” Ana said, gesturing at Sofia, “going through her things and picking the best for yourself? You should show some more respect.”

Pascuala tutted and grinned at Marina and Sofia. “I think someone’s worried that she’s missed out on the good stuff.”

Ana glared at her. “Elisa was my friend, that’s all, and I don’t like to see three greedy old women rummaging through her things a few hours after her funeral!”

Pascuala stared back at her, hostility in her eyes. “Elisa was my friend too. She’d have wanted me to have a personal memento.”

Ana gestured at the pile of linen and the stack of plates next to Pascuala. “She’d have wanted you to have her sheets and crockery to remember her by? What a load of rubbish. She’d have wanted her things given to charity.” A guilty memory flashed up in her mind of throwing the suitcases of clothes into the river, and she felt like a hypocrite, but she kept glaring at Pascuala.

“We are charity. And if you don’t like it, go upstairs.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying here and collecting some of this stuff for the nuns at San Lorenzo, like Elisa would have wanted.”

Pascuala raised her eyebrows and looked away. “Fine.”

There was an awkward pause and Ana shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows,” she said, “maybe it’ll get her into heaven faster.”

She walked across the room, stepping over the bundles of clothes, and pulled out the first drawer of the commode, where she knew that Elisa kept personal things; locks of hair, baby teeth, her marriage certificate, old photographs. She sat down on the floor underneath the window, her back to the other women, and started sorting through it. At the front of the drawer she found a brown envelope with her name written on the front. Inside there was a sheet of paper, folded in two, and the glint of gold at the bottom. Ana slid the paper out and unfolded it. The spelling was atrocious and the lines wavered all over the page, but it was legible, and Ana’s heart contracted with grief as she read it. The brief note left her the contents of the envelope: two wedding rings, one large and one smaller, a locket on a fine gold chain, and another ring with a brown stone in it. It wasn’t much, for Elisa had been poor, but Ana was very moved. She clipped the chain around her neck and let the locket drop down inside her dress. It rested just above her heart. She folded up the note and put it into her pocket, along with the rest of the jewellery.

“Did you hear about Teresa?” Pascuala said.

Ana turned around. "What about her?"

"It's terrible," said Pasquala, "a second tragedy in the building in as many days."

"What happened?" Ana was aware of the panic in her voice but couldn't control it.

"Federico was taken away by the Civil Guards."

"What?"

"Yes, he was back from the war, somehow, but the Civil Guards came and took him away."

"How did they know he was there?"

Pasquala shrugged. "The city's full of informers. She couldn't keep him hidden forever."

"That's terrible," said Ana. "Teresa must be in bits."

Pasquala looked at her oddly. "She hung herself," she said. "She was found this morning."

The room seemed to spin for a minute. "That's – my God," said Ana. She realised she was trembling. "I'm going upstairs. I have to go home."

"We should be finished by the end of the day," Pasquala said. "You can take everything we've left to the nuns then."

Ana nodded and made her way across the room. Shutting the door behind her, she leant against the wall for a moment, her eyes aching, before starting slowly up the stairs.

## The Ebro River, March 1938

When the retreat began, Michael was disbelieving. They'd fought hard for every mile gained and the company had been cut down to half its strength.

"What do they mean, a tactical retreat?" he said when the command came through. "Every mile of ground we've won is soaked in the blood of our own fucking soldiers. What's the point if we go back now? After what it's cost us?"

"Keeping the rest of us alive, that's the fucking point," Johnny replied.

"The generals know best," Charlie added, but Michael shook his head in disgust.

"The generals know fuck all," he said, and they left it at that, just shouldered their packs and followed the company.

The Nationalists had been hard on their heels every step of the way and when the wind came from the north it filled their nostrils with the smell of the dead. There wasn't even time to bury them; they'd stop and fight and as soon as there was a lull, the retreat would continue. They were only a couple of miles from the river when the planes came and the artillery fire began, the evening air suddenly full of noise and smoke.

"Back to the top of the hill," Peter shouted, running along the line of men. Michael turned, swinging his rifle over his shoulder and loading it as he ran up the slope. When he reached the crest of the hill he dropped to the ground and lay flat, peering over the summit. He could see tanks advancing and enemy soldiers crouching in bomb craters, firing up towards them. Johnny, Charlie and Bill flung themselves down beside him. Johnny fired, reloaded, fired, reloaded, each time taking careful aim with his eyes narrowed. There were grey cloaked soldiers creeping up the hillside like mist, finding cover where no other soldiers could have, hugging every dip in the ground. Michael unclipped the grenades from his belt and laid them before him, pulling out the pin and holding it for carefully judged seconds before lobbing it down the hillside towards them. His grenade exploded, followed by screams, but Michael shut out the sounds and pulled the pin from another grenade before throwing it over the hill. A plane swooped down, raking the ground with machine gun fire, and yells came from down the line.

"Fuck this for a game of soldiers," shouted Johnny over the shrieking of the engines. Charlie took aim with his rifle and fired at a tank that was trundling up the hill towards them, the dark metal gleaming in the light. He hit the gun and the tank burst into flames, the hatch

opening, soldiers tumbling out. Some of them were on fire, and Johnny and Bill shot down the others.

“Good shot Charlie,” yelled Bill. “I’m out of ammunition.”

Johnny tossed him a cartridge and he reloaded quickly while Michael chucked his final grenade at another oncoming tank. It bounced harmlessly off the metal and rolled underneath the tracks. As Michael reloaded, there was a small explosion, then a larger one, and the tank was lifted off the ground, tipping over on to its side. Men crawled out of the door, other soldiers running forward to help them, but they were exposed on the hillside, and as Michael fired he saw them drop, one, two, three. The rocks before them were pitted with bullet holes, the shots throwing up tufts of earth. Suddenly there was a movement to their right, the grey cloak of a North African soldier and the flash of a knife. He’d somehow come right up on them without them noticing but Johnny rolled on to his back and fired up into his stomach. The man collapsed, blood bubbling at his mouth, falling full length in front of the four of them. Johnny rested his rifle on the dead man’s back and kept on firing, but he’d fallen in such a way that his head was turned, his eyes looking directly into Michael’s.

Michael swallowed hard. “I’m out of ammunition!” he called.

Bill pulled the gun from the dead man’s hand and passed it to him. “Use their own fucking bullets on the bastards,” he shouted. The bombardment was becoming heavier, the ground shuddering under the artillery fire. The body before them was twitching and shaking as it was filled with Fascist bullets. Michael looked to his left and realised that the rest of the company had started to retreat. He looked behind him and saw Peter shouting up to them. His voice was barely audible over the sound of fire but Michael made out the words.

“Back to the river,” he shouted.

Michael turned round. “Peter’s saying to retreat!”

“In this? We’ll get shot in the back!”

Bill pointed and they looked up to see the small snub nosed Chekhas of the People’s Army. “The bombers’ll cover us,” he shouted.

“Just a minute,” yelled Johnny, “let me get this one persistent bastard.”

“Johnny we’re going to get cut off!” shouted Charlie.

“Hang on!” He fired a final shot and then swung his gun over his back, crouching on the ground. “Right, let’s make a move.”

They began running down the hill, weaving from side to side. Michael could see bodies in the Republican uniform but he avoided looking at their faces. He didn’t want to know who they were leaving behind any more. Adrenalin gave him speed and the ground



flashed by, and after a few minutes Michael's mind emptied of everything but the movement of his body. He was only aware of the tearing in his chest, the pumping of his legs, the swing of his arms through the smoke filled air. And then he saw the gleam of the river, the setting sun reflecting off its surface.

The first crossing had been months back, at the start of the Ebro campaign, the end of January. It was a clear night when they went over, the river was full from the winter rains but the water was smooth, gleaming in the moonlight, the reeds that lined the banks a dull silver. They'd crossed in little boats, in silence, guns on their backs, the only sound paddles dipping in and out of the dark water. The sound had brought a whole summer back in a flash for Michael, the summer when he was ten years old and the whole family had gone to Donegal. His da was working on the boats and they stayed with Granny in the house in Mullach Dubh. There was a lake behind the house and they'd spent most days paddling about in a tiny boat, so full of holes that Michael, Nora, Manus and Kathleen all had to bail out the water in tin cans while Edward rowed. It was a miracle none of them had been drowned, looking back on it.

But it was that sound, the soft splashing of oars in the water, and for a moment he hadn't been in Spain at all, he'd been back out on that lake, with Manus and Edward fighting over who got to row, Nora abandoning her can to trail her hand in the water when she thought nobody was looking, Kathleen bailing water out twice as fast to make up for it. And then as the sun got lower in the sky and the light got that soft evening tint to it, they'd see their mam walking down the hill from the house with Annie wrapped in a shawl and they'd hear her voice ringing out across the water, calling them in so they could all walk down to the strand and meet their da off the boat. She'd never said it at the time but after they were back in Glasgow she'd told them her fear that the sea would keep him. That was why she'd walked down to the shore every evening with all the kids, so he'd have to come back, because they were standing there waiting. The other women in the village said she should have had her man's meal out on the table but his da never seemed to mind when he came off the boat and walked round on to the strand. His mam would be sitting up at the back of the beach, her shoes beside her, Annie in her lap, while the rest of them messed about down at the water's edge, turning over jellyfish with sticks and throwing stones into the water. Sometimes his mam would bring a bucket and they'd all collect winkles to have with the dinner. Michael liked pulling them out of their curly shells with a pin but Nora refused to eat them. Once they saw their da coming, though, they'd all run up to the top of the beach. The other men would shout goodbye to him, and nod at their mam, and when they were all away she'd let her hair

down out of the headscarf, and if it was windy it would fly out like a dark flag behind her as they walked up the road. His da would swing Nora up through the air on to his shoulders, and take his mam's hand, the one that Kathleen wasn't holding. As they walked Edward and Manus would tell him what they'd been doing that day, shouting over one another, but Michael was happy just to walk along quietly, in the midst of his family.

He remembered how his heart had been thudding with fear and adrenaline on the crossing at the start of the Ebro offensive, and even while his mind was full of his family he knew he might not see any of them again. But they'd cut through the enemy lines and pushed eighty kilometres into Nationalist territory, and for a while it had seemed that the tide was turning, that fortune had finally started smiling on them, that they could still win the war, that he might, after all, make it back home.

They reached the river. All along the bank there were soldiers jumping into boats, some grabbing for oars while the others turned their rifles back towards the bank, covering their retreat. Some men were swimming, the current dragging them downstream.

"Hold the position until a boat comes back for you!" Peter was shouting. "The current's too strong for swimming it!"

There was a boat in the reeds with space enough for all four of them. George was already in it, pushing it away from the bank with the oar, and Michael splashed through the shallow water and jumped in. As he turned round to make space for Johnny, waiting in the water, he realised that Charlie wasn't with them. Johnny climbed in as Michael looked up and down the riverbank.

"Where's Charlie?"

"He's behind us," said Johnny, turning round. Bill splashed down from the bank.

"Fuck," said Johnny. "Where's Charlie?"

Bill looked at Johnny, then at Michael, who stood up, rocking the boat. Johnny took a step out of the boat, one leg in, one leg out.

"We need to move!" George's voice was hard with urgency and Bill moved to get into the boat.

"I'm not moving a fucking muscle until you tell me where that fucking boy is," shouted Johnny, grabbing Bill by the shoulder.

Bill shook his head. "He didn't make it."

Michael's legs went weak and he sat down. Water splashed over the edge of the boat on to the knees of his trousers, turning the material dark green. He looked up at Johnny, who was standing still, staring at Bill.

“Get in the fucking boat,” George was shouting, pulling at Johnny’s shoulders. The boat rocked from side to side. “What use is it if you get yourself killed too, and me with you? Get in the fucking boat!”

Michael stood up and Johnny turned round. “Let me out,” said Michael, “I’m going back for him. Let me past.”

Johnny looked at him and then at Bill. Bill pushed Johnny into the boat and he staggered and sat down on one of the benches.

“Sit the fuck down, Michael, he’s beyond any help you can give him now,” George said, and started pushing off.

The water around them went up in sprays from the bullets. There was a bump against the side of the boat and they looked over to see a body, floating face down, drifting away in the water. Michael started struggling and Johnny put his arms around him.

“We’ll go back for him, Mickey,” he kept repeating, “we’ll go back for him.”

Michael fought him but Johnny was stronger, his arms locked around Michael’s shoulders, bearing down on him with all his weight until he forced him down into the bottom of the boat. Bill was crouched in the stern, firing back at the bank. After a few minutes they were out of range, and Johnny let go of Michael. Johnny slumped back against the side of the boat and took his cigarettes out of his pockets. He struck a match but the trembling of his hands shook the flame out. He lit another but the same thing happened and with a sudden, violent movement he flung the matches against the side of the boat. They bounced and fell into the inch of water at the bottom. Bill lit a cigarette and passed it to Johnny. He took it and drew in a deep, shaky breath, but he didn’t meet Michael’s eyes.

By the time they reached the opposite shore, the sun had set. The boat knocked against the riverbank and Johnny stood up. “Get out,” he said to George and Bill.

“What?”

“I’m going back for him.”

Bill shook his head. “It’s suicide. You’ll get hit before you even make it to the other bank.”

“If you try to stop me again, I’ll fucking kill you,” said Johnny, staring him in the eye.

Bill held up his hands and climbed out of the boat. “You’re a fucking madman. Come on, Michael.”

“I’m going with Johnny,” Michael said.

“I’m going myself,” said Johnny.

“Both of you get out this minute,” said George, “our orders are to retreat. You’re soldiers in this army, therefore you follow fucking orders. Now get out of this boat.”

“Go fuck yourself, comrade.”

“What’s going on?” Peter was standing on the bank behind them. Bill started climbing up and Peter put out his hand and pulled him up.

“Charlie didn’t make it, and Johnny wants to go back for him,” he said, shrugging his shoulders and lighting a cigarette.

“How do you know he’s dead?” Michael shouted, his voice wavering. “It’s not like you waited around to find out, you fucking bastard!”

“I saw his brains exploding out the front of his head!” shouted Bill. “He was my mate too but this is fucking madness.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Come on.” Peter’s voice was calm. “Get out of the boat, comrade.”

Johnny put his hand up to his face and pinched the bone between his eyes. George stepped out of the boat.

“I’m going to post a watch on the river,” said Peter, “but I don’t think they’ll come across tonight. We’ll set up camp in the village a mile or so back.”

George nodded and started walking away. Peter stepped down into the water and held out his hand to Michael.

“Come on man. There’s nothing you can do for him now.”

Michael looked at Johnny, who nodded, and he stepped out of the boat. His boots filled up with water and he made his way through the reeds to the bank. They walked back through the groves of olive trees in silence.

When they reached the village it was dark. They’d been billeted in the small church, and through the open doors Michael could see the men sitting and lying along the benches inside, their faces grimy with sweat and dust. Men were arriving in a steady stream from the direction of the river and another company of Spanish soldiers had arrived. A medical station had been set up in the chapel house, and the walking wounded were entering, blood congealing in their wounds. Ambulances were coming and going with the more serious cases. A lorry arrived and a couple of soldiers started unloading it.

“Dónde es la cocina?” one of them asked Michael.

Michael stared at him for a moment and the man shrugged and moved off. Johnny sat down against the wall of the church and took out his cigarettes. His hands were still shaking but he managed to light one this time. Michael looked at him.

“How can you sit there, smoking a fucking cigarette?” he said.

Johnny looked up at him.

“You stopped me from going back,” Michael said. His voice was shaking but he didn’t care. “I was going to go back for him and you stopped me.”

“And I’m supposed to let you get killed too?” said Johnny, standing up to face him.

“You stopped me going back for him,” said Michael.

“You would’ve been killed,” said Johnny.

“Well what the fuck do you care? I was going to go back for him and you stopped me, and now he’s lying out there by himself, in the dark, on his own.”

Johnny dragged his hand over his chin. “Charlie – Charlie would have been proud to die for this cause,” he said. “He believed in it. He had a soldier’s death.”

“Don’t give me that shite,” Michael said, shaking his head. “You don’t believe in any of that.”

“He did but.”

They didn’t speak for the rest of the evening, but they lay down side by side to sleep as usual. Michael lay on his back and looked up at the ceiling of the church. It was blue, painted with golden clouds and angels, and he half expected Charlie to make some comment about the opium of the masses. He imagined Charlie’s body, lying out on the hillside among all the other corpses, facedown in the mud. He’d be cold by now. Tears ran down his cheeks into his ears. Johnny nudged him and offered him a cigarette.

“I can’t stop thinking about him, Johnny. Lying out there all alone in the dark.”

“Thinking on it won’t do any good,” said Johnny. “Try to get some sleep, I’d say we’ll need it.”

Michael couldn’t remember falling asleep but he woke up in the middle of the night and Johnny wasn’t beside him. He sat up, blinking, his eyes sore and dry. There were raised voices outside and he stepped over the sleeping bodies to the door. Johnny was standing with his hands crossed behind his head, a Spanish captain holding a gun at his back. Peter was conducting a rapid conversation in Spanish. Johnny saw Michael and shrugged.

“Peter? What’s happened?”

“They caught him trying to sneak back across the river,” said George, who was standing by the door. “They thought he was deserting to the Fascists.”

The Spanish soldier lowered his gun and Peter jerked his head in their direction.

“Get to your fucking bed,” he said, his voice tight. “I’ll deal with you in the morning.”

Michael stepped back and allowed Johnny in the door in front of him. They didn’t speak as they walked over to their bedrolls. Johnny lay down and turned away from Michael, and Michael lay down too, but he didn’t even try to get back to sleep. He just lay there, his eyes open in the dark.

## The Second Funeral

It was the morning of the funeral and Ana was sitting on the end of Isabella's bed in her underclothes as Isabella rummaged through her wardrobe.

"You just can't wear that, Ana. It's far too big for you now, and besides, I just don't think it's dressy enough. You know that Mama would have wanted us to look nice."

Ana sighed, looking down at her dress. It was true that it no longer fitted her. She'd caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she'd been changing that morning. Her ribs were visible under her skin, a row of dimples down her side, and her hip bones jutted sharply out from her stomach. Her thighs were thin and the skin of them hung loosely, used to covering more flesh. Her breasts, once so pert and rounded, were now little more than flat discs with little folds of skin underneath where they had begun to sag. She'd stood up and looked at herself, full length, in the mirror. Her skin was drawn tightly over her collarbones and her feet and hands looked enormous in comparison to the slightness of her limbs.

"Did you hear about the resistance?" Isabella said, as she tossed yet another dress on to the bed.

"What resistance?" Ana said wearily. There seemed to be precious little resistance in the city; the Nationalists had stamped it out with great vigour at the very start of the war and Ana could barely remember a time before the repressive, fearful atmosphere that hung over the streets.

"Apparently there are undercover Communists, attacking capitalists who give money to Franco."

"Maybe they'll get rid of Manuel for us," Ana said.

"It's not a joke, Ana! And," Isabella paused, "they – they mutilate the bodies."

"What do you mean?"

"They found a man with his eyes torn out," Isabella said. "Isn't that horrible? I've not been able to sleep at night for thinking about it. It's terrifying, to think of these rojos plotting to murder people in such a gruesome way."

Ana didn't reply, but she didn't imagine that underground Communists were to blame.

"Here it is," said Isabella, holding out a black, high collared dress.

"That'll never fit me," said Ana, taking it from her. Isabella was the most petite of the three girls.

"It will now that you're nothing but skin and bone."

Ana stepped into the dress and turned around so Isabella could fasten it.

“You should fix your hair,” Isabella pointed out. She was right but Ana rolled her eyes all the same. She quickly tidied her hair, pinned on her hat, and then put a hand to the pearls around her neck.

“Aren’t you going to wear Mama’s pearls?” Isabella asked.

Ana frowned. “These are Mama’s pearls,” she said.

“They’re not.”

“They are, Isabella,” Ana said, her voice tight and strained.

Isabella looked puzzled. “Maybe you’ve not been wearing them for long enough.”

Ana nodded in agreement, even though she’d clipped them round her neck as soon as she’d woken up that morning. Isabella reached out and touched them with the tip of one finger.

“They suit you, anyway,” she said soberly.

“Isabella! Vamos, Manuel and Aurelia will be arriving any minute!” The voice of Pedro, Isabella’s husband, floated through the door.

“Va bien, va bien, we’re coming!” she shouted back.

“Aren’t we meeting them at the church?”

“Manuel’s coming in his car,” said Isabella. “I didn’t tell you before, I knew you wouldn’t come.”

Exhaustion overwhelmed Ana at the thought of sitting in a car with them, how the air would vibrate with tension. “But what about petrol rationing?” she asked.

“Manuel has plenty of money for the black market,” said Isabella.

A horn beeped outside.

When they climbed into the back of the car Ana sat between Isabella and Pedro. Manuel ignored her, but Aurelia’s eyes fastened resentfully on the pearls around her neck.

The pews were more or less full when they arrived at the church. Ana recognised old neighbours and customers of her father, Angel and his wife among them, who nodded to her as she walked down the aisle behind Aurelia and Manuel, and Isabella and Pedro. With a rush of gratitude she saw Mercedes, Antonia and Marguerita sitting halfway up the church, black shawls around their shoulders. Mercedes and Marguerita smiled at her, and Antonia looked up and nodded. There were also many people there who she didn’t know, well dressed women with furs around their shoulders and men in suits and uniforms. She guessed that they



were friends and acquaintances of her sisters and their husbands. At the front of the church was the coffin, an arrangement of white flowers on the lid.

After a couple of minutes the organ notes rang through the air and the voices of the congregation swelled to meet them. Ana tried to sing but her throat was dry, her voice cracking on every note. When the hymn was finished the priest crossed the altar and began the service. The sound of the Latin brought back countless childhood Masses, sitting on the hard wooden pews, swinging her legs, hot and uncomfortable in the fussy dresses that she had to wear along with her sisters. Her father would be sitting slouched, hand in his pocket, toying with keys or coins or a piece of string, but her mother always sat up straight, eyes fixed on the priest, her rosary beads twisted round her gloved fingers, her prayerbook in her hand. Ana remembered, with a pang of guilt, the furious arguments she'd had with her mother in the years after her father's death. They hadn't spoken for a week after Ana accepted the job at the theatre. When her mother had suggested that they give up the apartment, which they couldn't really afford, and go to live with Manuel and Aurelia, Ana had started searching for her own apartment, one with a rent that she could afford on her theatre wage. She found an apartment just across the river from the theatre, not far from where she lived now, signed the lease, and presented her mother with a *fait accompli*, two days before the move. That had been their biggest argument but Ana had refused to back down, and had packed her things and moved that night.

Only when she met Frasco did she try to rebuild their relationship and for a time the visits hadn't been so bad. She'd even persuaded her mother to come to the theatre one night, and she'd paid Ana a compliment on the costumes, and said she'd enjoyed her evening. After that night Ana had started dropping the odd hint here and there about Frasco, allowing herself the pleasure of speaking his name. A few weeks later Isabella came round for a visit.

"Look, I probably shouldn't tell you this," she said, leaning forward on her chair, "but when Manuel heard that you'd started spending time with this Frasco, he asked some questions about him. He knows that Frasco voted for the Republicans in the last election, and he knows that he was involved in some government theatre committee thing in Madrid."

"The Teatro Lírico Nacional," Ana said, staring at Isabella. "How does Manuel know that? And why is he asking questions about him?"

"He's just trying to make sure that he's suitable."

Ana snorted. "More likely he's making sure his 'social standing' isn't affected by his sister-in-law."

“Well, anyway, I think that it’s wrong of you not to see Mama because of Manuel,” Isabella said. “What would Papa say?”

Ana sighed. “You’re right.”

But as the months went on, her mother seemed more and more critical of her, and Ana suspected that it was the influence of Manuel and Padre Gonzalez. She’d invited them all to her wedding but Isabella was the only one who came, despite her own disapproval. It would have been different, Ana was sure, if her father had still been alive. He’d always been able to talk her mother round, acting as the peacemaker when they had an argument. But then, if he had been, she wouldn’t have gone to work in the theatre, and perhaps she wouldn’t have met Frasco in the first place.

Suddenly Isabella elbowed her in the side and Ana realised that she was meant to stand. She stood up and sat down with the others, and was again reminded of those childhood Sundays, where she’d daydreamed her way through the incomprehensible Latin of the service, being dragged to her feet and pushed back down at the appropriate moments by her mother or sisters. She’d been close to her mother as a child. She could still remember the sensation of climbing into her lap in the evenings, drowsy with sleep, or helping her in the kitchen, shaking flour into a bowl to make a cake, her mother laughing at her dusty face. She bowed her head, trying to hide her grief, but at that moment everybody stood up again. The heavy scent of incense filled the air as the priest stepped around the coffin, swinging the pendulous holder back and forth over the wood. Ana looked at the coffin, trying and failing to imagine her mother inside. The service was drawing to a close and as people opened their hymnbooks, four pallbearers stepped forward and hoisted the coffin on to their shoulders. As they moved up the aisle Manuel and Aurelia stepped out behind them, Aurelia leaning on Manuel’s shoulder, her face a mask of tears. Behind them walked Isabella and Pedro, and Ana could see how tightly her sister was clinging to Pedro’s arm. Ana walked behind them, alone. Through a supreme effort of will she kept her face composed and her steps steady. When she drew level with the prostitutes Mercedes slipped out of the pew and put her arm round Ana’s shoulders, gripping her tightly, and Ana walked with her outside the church. An expression of shock passed over Manuel’s face when he saw them and he flushed and looked down on meeting Ana’s eyes. The rest of the congregation began filing out of the church and Antonia reached them among the crowds, Marguerita at her shoulder. Ana pressed her hand tightly.

“I’m sorry for your trouble, Ana,” said Marguerita.

“Thank you for coming Marguerita. And you, Antonia. I’m glad you did.”

Antonia nodded and smiled, returning the pressure on her hand.

“We’ll go home when you go to the graveyard, sister,” said Mercedes.

“I’m not going to the reception,” said Ana.

“Then come and see us,” said Mercedes and Antonia nodded. “You shouldn’t spend today alone.”

“I will,” said Ana.

They began to move off through the crowds of people, but Mercedes turned back quickly. “Antonia remembered the name,” she said into Ana’s ear, and Ana nodded. Once they’d gone she began greeting the people who’d come to the funeral, kissing their cheeks and shaking their hands, as Isabella and Aurelia were doing beside her. The faces and voices were a blur to her until a tall man in uniform stopped in front of her. Ana looked away with instinctive distaste.

“Hola Ana. Don’t you know me any more?”

She looked up into his face, and recognised him. “Gabriel,” she said slowly, unsure of how to react, unable to reconcile the childhood friend and the uniform.

“I’m sorry about your mother, Ana,” he said, taking her hands in his. “She was always kind to me. I remember she used to give us bottles of lemonade when the weather was hot.”

Ana smiled uncomfortably. “It’s nice to see you Gabriel. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s the least I could do. I’m back to the front tomorrow, but I wanted to pay my respects.”

“I appreciate it,” Ana said. He started to move away, and on a sudden impulse she called after him, “Gabriel!” He turned around, their eyes meeting through the crowd, and raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Take care of yourself at the front,” she said. He nodded and turned back round. Then Isabella was tugging at her arm, saying, “It’s time to go,” and they were back in the car. Ana looked out of the window at the streets of the city. The graveyard was in the north, on the high ground that sloped upwards to the mountains. She passed Elisa’s grave on the way to her parent’s. The flowers that she’d placed there two days ago were beginning to fade, the petals browning at the edges. At the graveside Ana wished for the release of tears as the coffin was lowered into the ground, but none came. The three sisters each tossed a handful of earth into the grave, the soil rattling off the wood. Ana knew people were looking at her dry eyes and walked away, across the hillside. The city lay before her, the rooftops and towers and spires gleaming in the sunlight. She’d spent her whole life

within the city walls. The geography of the streets was the geography of her memories, and she wondered if she would be able to leave. It would only be for a year or so, she consoled herself. No exile lasts forever.

## The Ebro, May 1938

The evenings had grown longer and stiller, the countryside weighed down with a heat that silenced insects and stifled the wind. It was hotter that it had been this time last year. Then they'd been in Jarama, football games and endless nights on watch with Charlie scribbling away to his girl. Even after two months, Michael still expected to see him there when he woke in the mornings, lying between him and Johnny. He wondered if Charlie's family had been notified yet: his miner da, his mam who made the best scones in Sheffield, his big brothers and sisters. He wondered if his girl, Gwennie, had found out. All those letters she'd written to him, tied in a bundle with string, that Charlie had carried in the inside pocket of his jacket. Michael often thought about them. He imagined, though he couldn't say why, a fascist searching Charlie, as they searched the bodies of Nationalist soldiers, and tossing the letters aside into the grass. The string would maybe have come undone, the sheets of paper teased apart by the wind and blurred by the rain, and all those words lost among an army where nobody would understand what they meant, or what they'd done when they'd shot Charlie through the back of the head as he ran down to the river. He'd thought one night that if he was killed Leila would never know, nobody would think to tell her. The memory of that night in Paris had all but disappeared. He'd thought about it too many times, and now it was just a memory of a memory.

"Do you want an apple?"

Him and Johnny had been put on night watch together, the first time since Johnny had tried to recross the river.

"What?"

Johnny pulled two apples out of his pocket and tossed one to Michael. It smacked into the palm of his hand. The skin was a faded red, like September leaves, and slightly wrinkled, but it felt firm enough.

"Where did you get those?"

"I saw a box of them outside the quartermasters, so I lifted some."

Michael shook his head. "You're an eejit. You'd have got a bollocking if you'd been caught."

Johnny shrugged. "I wasn't but, was I?"

Michael bit into his apple. The flesh was a bit dry, but still sweet.

"I remember one autumn," he said, his mouth full.

“Amemrunoton,” mimicked Johnny. “I don’t understand a word you’re saying with that mouthful.”

Michael swallowed. “Do you know when you’ve heard a story that many times, you remember it yourself as if you were there?”

“How do you mean?”

“Like I was about to say there, I remember one autumn, but I don’t remember it, I was only a babby at the time. I’ve just heard the story that often that I can see it as if I was there.”

“Aye, I know what you mean.”

Johnny flung away the core of his apple. It bounced across the ground and landed between the twisted roots of an old olive tree.

“What were you saying anyway?”

Michael took another bite of his apple before continuing. “It was the end of the autumn, and my da had been away up north working.”

“On the boats?”

“Do you know, I don’t remember what he was doing up north.”

“My da used to do seasons out on the boats that went out from Aberdeen.”

“Aye it was maybe that, I don’t remember. Working somewhere up north, anyway. He’d been away for a couple of months. We were living in Nicholson Street then, on the first floor, and my mam was hanging out the window keeping an eye on the weans. Edward and Kathleen were all right, they were big enough to be out on their own. Manus was only four, but you couldn’t keep him in, my mam said, he was like a devil, he’d have climbed out the window if you’d kept him from going out with the others. So she’s looking out the window, anyway, and she sees my da walking up the street carrying his old cardboard suitcase. She’s thinking he looks heavier than usual which would be strange, because normally he’s lost a bit of weight from working so much and not eating right when he’s away. Then, she says, the next thing she hears is Kathleen screaming, “Daddy, oh my Daddy!” and my mam sees her and Edward and Manus pelting along the road to meet him. Manus is a bit behind the others, he’s only wee, you see, but when they reach him they climb all over him, clinging to him like limpets, my mam says, as he’s walking. Still, my da gets up the street, even with all these weans hanging off him, and as he gets closer my mam realises that he’s not put on weight, he’s wearing every single piece of clothing he went away with. Before she can ask why, one of the weans kicks the suitcase, or it comes open anyhow, and all these wee green apples come tumbling out and go everywhere, hundreds and hundreds of them, rolling all over the pavement and down into the street, and all the kids out playing are going wild, chasing them

everywhere, and my da's just standing there shrugging his shoulders and laughing. Anyway, my mam must've told us this story a million times, and even though I was only two or three years old at the time, I can picture it as clear as day."

"Where did the apples come from?"

"He passed an orchard on his way home and thought he'd help himself."

"A man after my own heart."

"Aye." Michael finished his apple and scraped a hole in the ground with his fingers, placing the core in and smoothing the earth over it.

"Do you want another one?" said Johnny.

"How many did you take?"

"There's one more."

There was a pause.

Michael shook his head. "No, you're all right."

Johnny put the other apple down on the ground between them. "Well it's there if you want it."

Michael looked up at the sky. It was still fairly light in the west, but the eastern horizon was rimmed with darkness. The heat hadn't diminished, and when he shifted position he realised that his shirt was clinging damply to his back.

"What do you miss the most about home, Mickey?"

"About my family, do you mean, or about Glasgow?"

"Dunno, either I suppose."

"I don't know. Kathleen's wee boys were only babbies when I left. They'll be bigger now."

"What age?"

"Well how long have we been here?"

"A year and a half, almost."

"They'll be almost three, then. I often wonder how they're getting on."

"She married?"

"Aye, but her man's a bastard."

"Aye?"

"She never came around the house much after she got married. My mam used to go round and see her, and one time she came back in a wild rage, said he'd been hitting Kathleen and that she was going to break his neck. The four of us went straight round there, me and

Manus and Edward and my da, but he was out drinking.” Michael shook his head at the memory. “She was black and blue.”

“Was this before she had the twins?”

“She wasn’t showing yet, but she was a few months gone. Her face was a fucking mess.”

“The bastard.”

“Aye. Manus caught him outside the pub a few nights later, and gave him a right doing, broke one of his arms.”

“Good on him.”

“Told him he’d kill him if he laid another finger on her. He hasn’t, since, but they’re not happy. She spends a lot of time round at ours.”

“There’s nothing worse than a man that would hit a woman.”

“Aye.”

“Anyone else married in your family?”

“Edward’s married to a girl called Marie. They’ve a wee girl, Kitty, and she was expecting another when I left. Manus is the wild one, I don’t see him ever getting married.”

“No?”

“He’s always out drinking and fighting. He’s good craic, though, and there’s always girls after him, but nobody’s managed to catch him yet.”

“Sounds like I’d get on all right with him.”

“Aye,” Michael said, “yous would have a bit in common, I’d say.”

They both laughed.

“Who do you miss from home?”

“It’s the city I miss,” said Johnny. “You know, the streets, the people. Buchanan Street on a Saturday night during the summer, when everybody’s leaving the dancing and it’s still light outside, even though it’s getting on for midnight. Everybody in shirtsleeves, it’s that warm a night, and the girls with bare arms and their hair down.”

“What about the Barras in the morning?” said Michael. “Your head would burst with the noise of all the shouting going on, cheap shoes here, old pots there. And the women fighting over bits and pieces on the stalls. Did you ever get a hot pie from the baker’s on the corner, before you go in? Best hot pies in Glasgow, we used to get them if we were going up to the football.”

“Argyle Street after the football was on, there’d be running battles in the street. I had a black eye every Saturday during the football season when I was seventeen.”



Michael laughed. "Now that doesn't surprise me."

"Going to the pub after winning at the bookies, and getting the drinks in, and all the old bastards trying to cadge a drink off you because they know you're in the money."

"It was Manus had all the luck with the horses," said Michael. "I never won a thing."

"But if I could be anywhere in Glasgow, I'd be on the Green, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, with a bottle of beer in one pocket and a pack of fags in the other. One of those days in April, or May, when the sun's out and there's heat in it, but the air's still cool on your skin, and full of the sound of the park. Weans playing football, yelling and laughing all together so that from far away you'd think it was a flock of birds you were hearing. And the men doing pull ups on the gymnasium bars, showing off, each trying to be a hard man and beat the one before him and the rest standing round passing comment."

Johnny's voice quietened, and to Michael it seemed as if he was talking to himself.

"Sometimes you'd get a rally, some trade unionist up making speeches and boys giving out leaflets. The men might wander over from the bars to see what the craic is but the women wouldn't be paying much attention, too busy pushing their prams and gossiping as they go. Courting couples, arm in arm, him keeping an eye to see who's looking at his girl and her watching him doing it, proud. And girls out by themselves in twos and threes, making eyes at all the passing men but ready to sharpen their tongues on them if any of them make too free. I miss Glasgow women, I do." He glanced at Michael and grinned. "Don't get me wrong, Mickey, these Spanish girls are bonny enough, but give me a Glasgow girl any day. I'd love one now, even just to talk to. A woman's voice, but with your own accent, there'd be something homely about it. Aye, a sunny Sunday afternoon, on the Green, with a bottle of beer in your pocket and a Glasgow girl on your arm, and the rest of the world going by."

Michael didn't reply.

"Do you know the days I mean, Mickey?"

Michael surprised himself by the anger in his voice. "I know them, Johnny, but I don't remember them. I don't remember what Glasgow Green looks like, or the feel of a girl on your arm, or the sound of weans playing football, and there's no point thinking on it." He stood up and gestured out over the country towards the enemy territory. "The fascists have pushed through to the sea. They've cut the Republic in half. And no matter how many offensives we're sent into, they've got more men, more guns, more planes, more tanks, more artillery, more everything, and no matter how well we do it just keeps pouring in from Germany and Italy. We're not getting home, Johnny, so it does no good talking on it."

Johnny stretched his legs out before him and tapped a cigarette out of his packet. He lit up, the tobacco crackling in the flame, and exhaled a cloud of smoke that hung in the still air. "Why did you come here, Mickey?"

"I came to fight fascism. Bombs on Madrid today means bombs on Glasgow tomorrow, that's what they used to say in those speeches they made on Glasgow Green. I came because I heard so many of those speeches I thought it might make a difference, because I've seen my da struggling all his life to make ends meet, moving us from one slum to another. I came because I spent three years tramping the streets looking for work that doesn't exist and I didn't want to stand on the street corner with everyone else. Thought I was better than that, maybe. I came because this government was giving the working man a chance, for once, and that was worth fighting for. But it's no good. This is a war that can't be won."

"But you didn't come to win. You came to fight, and that's what you're doing. Even if you don't get home, at least it's for something you believe in."

"Something I used to believe in. What happened to the solidarity of the workers in Barcelona last spring? Communists and anarchists shooting the shite out of one another, when we're meant to be standing together against the fascists. Every time George makes one of his fucking speeches, I want to laugh. I'm never going to see my mam or my da or my brothers or sisters or any of the babbies again, ever, over the head of an idea that meant fuck all at the time, only I was too daft to know it, and means fuck all now."

"Well you're in it now, Mickey. Even if you don't believe in it any more, you fight on it, just the same."

A great weariness suddenly overcame Michael, and he sat back down. "I know that. All I'm saying is, there's no point talking on home. We're going to die here, just like Charlie. It's better not to look back."

Johnny flicked away the end of his cigarette. The butt glowed in the darkness for a moment or two before dying out. "There's nothing wrong with thinking back to days when you were happy, that's all I'm saying. Times like the ones we're in, you have to take your happiness where you can. If you don't have that, what do you have?"

"Nothing," said Michael. "I've got nothing."

## The Port

When Mercedes opened the door to Ana the smell of broth floated out.

“I made you something to eat,” Mercedes explained, “I thought you might be hungry.”

Ana came inside, shaking her head. “I’ve no stomach for anything, Mercedes, but thank you anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re not hungry for it, sister; if you don’t eat you’ll become ill. You’ll need a bit of meat on your bones or else you’ll freeze on your voyage.”

Ana sat down at the table and allowed Mercedes to place a bowl in front of her and a spoon in her hand. While she was drinking the soup Antonia came in to the kitchen.

“So, this boatman...when is the best time to find him?” asked Mercedes.

“In the evening or in the early morning,” said Antonia, glancing at Ana.

Ana nodded and swallowed her soup. “What is his name?”

“Salvador.”

“I think it would be best to find him in the morning,” said Mercedes thoughtfully.

“Why?” Ana asked. She’d wanted to go as soon as possible.

“It would be different if we knew exactly where to find him, and at what time,” said Mercedes, “but it’s dangerous to wander around the port in the evening when it’s dark. I’ve heard rumours about bodies being found. All women, all young. But it’s not being reported. They’re all women like us, women who don’t matter. And of course there’s no such thing as crime in a city run by Franco’s government.”

Ana crossed her legs under the table and there was a clinking sound in her pockets. She’d forgotten Elisa’s jewellery was there. The three rings, one large, two small, gleamed in her hand. The locket was still round her neck, under her clothes along with the pearls.

“It’s not much,” Antonia said, “I don’t know if it will be enough.”

Ana stared at her, puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“To pay him. To pay Salvador. He won’t take you to Barcelona for nothing.”

Ana’s hand closed over the jewellery instinctively. “I can’t give these away,” she said. “They were left to me by the woman...by my neighbour who – who died.”

Both Mercedes and Antonia looked at her.

“Sister, what will you pay him with?”

Ana shook her head. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. I don’t have anything.”

“Then you’ll need to use that jewellery, Ana, and even then I don’t know if it will be enough.”

“What about the pearls?” Mercedes asked.

“No,” said Ana, her hand going to the pearls. “They belonged to my mother. I can’t give these away, it’s impossible.” She looked down at her left hand. “I could use my wedding ring.”

“You’ll probably have to,” said Mercedes.

“I’ll do the talking,” said Antonia. “Let me work out the price.”

“The fur coat,” Ana said. “It’s worth a lot of money. I could pawn that somewhere, I’m sure.”

Antonia shook her head. “No, Ana, keep that for the journey, for I’m sure you’ll need it. It’ll be cold on the water.”

“Is there nothing else you have of value?” Mercedes asked.

Ana shook her head. “No, we never had very much money, and the money we had we spent on going out with our friends. I was never the sort of woman who wanted fancy clothes and jewels.”

“Nor me,” said Mercedes, propping her chin on her hand. “Though even if I was, I still wouldn’t have any!”

There was a pause, and Ana yawned so widely she thought the bones in her face were going to crack. She covered her mouth with her hands. “I’ve not been sleeping well at all,” she said, her voice still thick with the yawn. “My sleep is very broken by strange, anxious dreams.”

“You do look tired,” Antonia said, standing up and crossing the kitchen to the stove.

Mercedes nodded. “If you want, you can sleep in Simona’s old room, where the bed is a bit more comfortable.”

Ana nodded before thinking, then remembered that she was sitting in a brothel. That bed was where Simona had earned her keep, and she couldn’t help the expression of distaste that crossed her face.

“I put fresh sheets on that bed yesterday,” Mercedes said, her face expressionless. “But you can sleep in the attic again if you prefer.” Ana shook her head, feeling terrible, worried that she’d insulted these women who had come to mean so much to her, and had helped her at every opportunity. She thought of Mercedes stepping out into the aisle of the church that morning to catch her as she stumbled, and shame made her face hot.

Mercedes leant forward and took Ana's hand in hers. "I'll wake you in the morning. We'll need to get up early to go to the port in any case."

"I am very tired," Ana said. "I'd like that."

Antonia turned her head from where she stood at the stove. "Will you not take a cup of tea first?" she said. "It's almost ready."

"Yes please," said Ana.

Antonia carried over the three chipped mugs and set them down on the table. Ana sipped at hers slowly, but it failed to warm her.

"I remember," said Antonia, "when I lived in Salapura, the women used to give their children tea when they were crying for food. It kills the hunger pangs."

Mercedes nodded. "I started smoking for the same reason, back when I arrived here from my village."

"I don't even feel hunger any more," said Ana. "I just feel a nausea, then a pain, and I know that I'll vomit if I don't eat soon."

The three women sat silently, all contemplating their poverty.

"The war will be over soon," said Antonia abruptly.

"I don't remember what I looked like before the war," said Mercedes. "I know that I was plumper, but I don't remember how I looked."

"I'm worried that Frasco won't recognise me," Ana said. She held the bodice of the dress out from her body. "This used to fit me."

"I'm sure he'll know you," Antonia said. "He'll have changed as well, you know."

Mercedes nodded in agreement. "Especially if he's been in prison," she said soberly. "I don't imagine the fascists treat their prisoners well."

"The main thing is that I get him back," said Ana. Her words reminded her of her next visit to the captain, in two days time, and looking up, she could see the same thought on Mercedes' face. Antonia's eyes were angry.

"Ana—" she began, but Mercedes held up her hand.

"That's enough, Antonia," she said, and Antonia fell silent. "Ana, are you tired now? Would you like to go to bed?"

Ana nodded, and followed Mercedes from the room.

Ana awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of screaming. There was a crash, and then the sound of someone stumbling heavily across the landing. In the background she could hear voices laughing and shouting, and the sound of the gramophone from the room below. The

door of the room opened, the dim light of the landing spilling into the darkness, a burly figure silhouetted against it, breathing heavily.

“Simona?” a voice said roughly. “Simona?”

Ana drew the covers up around her, frightened. “It’s not Simona,” she said, her voice coming out in a whisper. Then another figure appeared in the doorway, behind the first. Ana couldn’t make out the features of her face, but she could tell it was Mercedes by the line of her neck and shoulders.

“Come away,” she said, taking the man’s arm. He shrugged her off roughly and she lost her balance and stumbled against the doorframe.

“Who is it? Who’s there?” he said. His voice was thickened with alcohol. “A new girl, eh? Maybe I’ll give her a try.”

Mercedes lay her hand on his arm again. “She’s sick,” she said quickly. “Her body’s wasted, there are sores. You won’t take much pleasure from her.”

The figure turned and lurched across the landing. “Whores,” he muttered, before making his way heavily down the stairs. The voices grew louder and louder before the front door slammed. In the sudden quiet there was the sound of a woman sobbing. Mercedes and Antonia looked at one another, then crossed the landing, out of Ana’s line of sight. She pushed back the covers and pulled on her dress. When she tried to stand, her legs were shaking beneath her and she realised how frightened she’d been. She peered round the door out on to the landing as Luisa came up the stairs, a candle in her hand.

“Buenos noches, Luisa,” she said. Luisa looked at her with hard eyes, and then stopped for a moment and listened to the sound of voices from Marguerita’s room. She shook her head, and continued on up the next flight of stairs without speaking. Once the light from her candle had vanished, Ana stepped out of the doorway and pushed open the door of Marguerita’s room. Marguerita was lying on her side, crying quietly, wearing nothing but a slip, her legs bare and curled up to her chest. Her lip was split and her right eye swollen and half closed. Her head was resting in Mercedes’ lap. Mercedes was stroking her hair with long, smooth strokes, and Antonia was walking about the room with quick, angry steps.

“-don’t know why she lets that bastardo in,” she was saying. “It happens every time. Remember what he did to Simona? It was a month before the bruises faded.”

Mercedes’ eyes fell on Ana, standing in the doorway. “Go back to bed, sister,” she said. Her voice was calm but firm, and Ana backed away slowly and returned to Simona’s room. She didn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

Mercedes knocked on the bedroom door while it was still dark outside. Ana got dressed quickly and went downstairs, where Antonia and Mercedes were waiting for her.

“Is Marguerita all right?” she asked hesitantly. Mercedes nodded, and Antonia scowled. “He’s nothing but a pig with clothes on,” she said. “I don’t know why Luisa opens the door to him.”

“Money is money, whether it comes from him or not. Would you have us all starve? That’s what Luisa said last night anyway. She can’t afford to lose him as a client. We need to keep body and soul together somehow.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug, her expression one of resignation. “You’ve been here long enough to know that by now, Antonia.” Mercedes turned to Ana and handed her a shawl.

“There’s always a chill off the water, especially in the mornings.”

Antonia nodded in agreement. “The year’s beginning to turn,” she said, pulling her own shawl over her head as Mercedes opened the door. The three women stepped into the deserted street. All the windows were dark, and the sound of their boots on the cobblestones rang out in the silence. The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky at their backs as they walked along close together, keeping into the sides of the buildings, their heads covered. When they reached the port it was still very quiet, the water slapping against the sides of the boats the only sound. Antonia pointed at a boat moored at the very end of one of the long wooden piers.

“That’s his boat,” she said, her low voice surprisingly loud in the stillness. “Now we wait.”

They settled themselves on a low wall in front of a building with peeling paint and shutters hanging crookedly from the windows. They sat in silence. Ana remembered coming here with Frasco, after they were married. There was a taverna which did the best seafood dishes in the city a little further along the waterfront. It had been one of their favourites. Ana thought it was probably closed now. The owner, Daniel, had been a vociferous supporter of the Republic. Ana remembered the night the election results had been announced, in February 1936, the night that the liberals got back into power after two and a half years of conservative government. She’d been at the table with Frasco and their friends from the theatre, Emilio, Antonio, Luis, Pura and Alejandro, when Angel had come down from his apartment upstairs and announced to the entire restaurant, “The left are back in again! And to celebrate, everybody eats gratis tonight!” The port was, without question, a working class district, and everybody had raised their glasses and toasted the Second Republic without reservation. When they’d left the restaurant and walked out on the waterfront, the boats were all strung

about with lights, reflecting on the dark water, and the sound of music and laughter carried in the night air. Ana had leant into Frasco as they walked back up the hill towards the artists' quarter, his arm around her shoulders, his hand tucked inside the collar of her dress, warm against her skin. It seemed that every window was lit in celebration. The bars were full of people, spilling out on the street where they mingled with passers by, and the music of the guitaristas filled the air from various corners. Ana had laughed with pleasure at that fiesta of lights, music and voices. How different it was now, the dark, empty streets, the silence that seemed to flatten everything. She glanced at Mercedes and Antonia, sitting next to her on the low wall, their shawls over their heads, both contemplating the water before them. There was something eerie about the stillness of their features. Ana was about to speak when Mercedes turned her head.

"I thought I heard footsteps," she said in a whisper. Ana turned her head and saw a dark, squat figure approaching along the waterfront.

"That's him," said Antonia, rising from the wall. "Ana, give me the jewellery."

Ana hadn't realised that her hand had been in her pocket, her fingers wrapped tight around Elisa's paltry collection. She drew it out of her pocket and looked at it again. The wedding rings, and the other ring with the brown stone. It didn't look much at all, lying in the palm of her hand. Antonia gathered it up and then walked to meet the figure at the start of the pier. Ana bowed her head and drew the shawl further over her forehead to hide her face. Mercedes' voice was sympathetic.

"I'm sure that Elisa would have wanted you to do this, Ana. Everything happens for a reason, after all. Maybe you got to that envelope before the other women so you could use the jewellery to escape to safety. Maybe Elisa left it to you for that very purpose."

Ana nodded, but the kindness of Mercedes' words didn't lessen her sense of betrayal. The sky was light above them now, reflected in the water, and Antonia and Salvador were silhouetted against the liquid brightness. Antonia turned and walked towards them with swift steps.

"He says it's not enough." Ana's heart sank at her words. "He says – I'm sorry, Ana – he says that he wants your wedding ring as well." Ana nodded slowly and slid the narrow band off her finger, dropping it into Antonia's outstretched hand. She returned to Salvador. Their low voices carried across to the two women, but their words were indistinguishable, although by the tone of Antonia's voice and the rapid movements of her hands they seemed to be arguing. Finally she returned.



“He’s agreed to take you as far as Valencia,” she said. “I’m sorry Ana. He said Barcelona was too far.”

“Valencia? Is it safe there?” asked Ana.

“If he’s agreed to land there,” said Mercedes, “it must be safe.”

Ana nodded in agreement. “Very well then,” she said. “Valencia it is.”

“When shall you go, sister?”

“I don’t know.”

“When is your next meeting with the captain?” asked Mercedes.

“Tomorrow.” She shivered.

“Then tell him not tomorrow night, but the night after that,” Mercedes said, glancing at Ana for confirmation. Ana nodded, and Antonia returned to the figure at the start of the pier. They conversed for a moment longer and then he turned and walked away to the end of the pier. Antonia returned to Mercedes and Ana, who rose from the wall.

“He says to be here at sunset, the day after tomorrow.”

Ana nodded dumbly, trying to imagine sailing away from the walls of her city, possibly forever. Antonia took her hand and dropped the jewellery into her palm. “Bring this with you,” she said. “Don’t give it to him until you arrive at Valencia.”

“Thank you, Antonia.”

She shrugged. “It’s nothing, sister.”

“Come,” said Mercedes, glancing at the sky, “it’s getting light. Ana, will you come back and have a cup of tea with us before you go home?”

Ana shook her head. “Thank you Mercedes, but no. I’ll need to prepare for the journey. Will you – will you both come with me tomorrow? To the captain? I think – my courage might fail me if I have to go alone.”

Mercedes nodded again, and so did Antonia. “We’ll meet you at the Puente Sisto at ten.”

They walked together as far as the bridge. Mercedes hugged Ana, and after a moment’s hesitation, so did Antonia. Then they went their separate ways under the trees that lined the side of the road above the river.

Madrid, June 1938

Michael downed the glass in front of him and signalled to the barman for another. He'd been drinking wine earlier but had switched to brandy when everybody started dancing. There were a few of them on leave that weekend, Bill, Harry and George were part of the group, along with the other recruits who'd arrived a few months ago to make up for the losses. Johnny hadn't been allowed to come, denied his leave as a punishment for trying to get back across the river the night that Charlie was killed. Michael could tell Peter felt bad when they were leaving, but he supposed that he had to show face, especially when Johnny had disobeyed a direct order. He wished Johnny was here now, though. They'd be sitting at the bar together. The barman placed his glass in front of him, and Michael picked it up and swirled the golden liquid round before taking a gulp. It burned its way down his throat, reminding him of New Year's Eve, where its heat had been welcome against the cold midnight air and they'd toasted the new year. It seemed much longer than six months ago. Michael fumbled in his pockets for his cigarettes, dropping them on the floor. When he got off his bar stool he realised how drunk he was, swaying as he stood up again, cigarettes in his hand. There was a girl standing by his stool, smiling at him. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Would you like to dance?" she said, indicating the floor.

Michael looked over. They'd pushed the chairs and tables back when the guitarist had started, and there were maybe ten or twelve couples on the floor, swirling round, stamping their feet, their faces blurs in the candlelight. Peter spun past and winked at him over his partner's shoulder. He looked back at the girl. She was pretty, with big dark eyes and light brown hair coiled up at the back of her head, smiling at him expectantly. He shook his head.

"No, gracias."

She shrugged and stalked back to her table, obviously offended, and the two girls with her glared at him. Michael climbed back on to his barstool, almost knocking it over in the process, and stared into his drink once more.

"Don't you think so, Michael?" Bill's voice cut into his thoughts.

"Think what?"

Harry and Bill had appeared at the bar next to him. Their voices were low, they were glancing over at the table where the rest of the company were sitting.

"That we're fucked. That the People's Front doesn't have the first clue what it's doing."

Michael shrugged.

“The problem is,” said Harry, “that all the generals - or most of them anyway, all the old ones who had actual military experience – they all sided with Franco. We got left with a few duds, who have no idea how to fight a war, plan battles, use their resources wisely.”

“But there are hardly any resources anyway,” said Bill. “Not compared to what the Fascists are getting from Hitler.”

“We’re a resource,” said Harry. “Look at Belchite, for example. We took the town, we lost the town. We ended up in the same position, but God knows how many thousands of men fewer.”

Bill’s face darkened.

“I don’t mean -” said Harry. “Eddie died a soldier’s death, fighting for democracy. But I just wish the generals would choose their battles more wisely. I suppose it’s better since the Russians took charge. They seem to know what they’re doing.”

“I’m sure they’ve got their own agenda,” said Bill.

“What?” George had come up behind them.

“Nothing,” Bill and Harry both said at once.

George stared at them both for a minute. Then he turned around and walked back to the table.

“Watch yourself on him,” said Harry.

“Fuck this,” said Bill. “I didn’t come to fight for this.”

Michael looked back down into his drink. There was something floating on the surface of his drink, splintering the light from the smoky candle in front of him. He had to get out of here. He finished his drink in one quick gulp and stood up, pulling his folded cap out of his jacket pocket and putting it on.

“Where are you off to? I got distracted there, I was up for more drinks.” Harry rummaged around in his pockets for money. “What are you having?”

Michael shook his head from side to side. “I – I’m going out. For a walk. Too close in here.” The words sounded thick and clumsy in his mouth.

Harry peered at him. “Do you know you’ve got your cap on backwards? The star goes at the front.”

Michael tried to pull the cap round but accidentally pulled it off. It fell to the floor, landing in a puddle of wine. He squinted at the ground, shrugged and turned away.

“Here, your cap.” Harry pushed it against his arm. “Better not leave that, it’s part of the uniform.”

“Aye, Peter might...might cancel my leave if I go back without that, eh?”

Harry frowned. “I don’t think he would, but even so.”

Michael pulled his cap on, flattening his hair against his forehead. The ends curled into his eyes and he shook his head, putting his hand on the bar to steady himself.

“Here, are you all right?” said Bill. “I mean, for walking about by yourself. You look pretty rough mate.”

“What, because Johnny’s not here to look after me you mean?” Michael could hear the aggressive tone in his voice, but didn’t know how to prevent it.

Bill frowned again. “No, just because you seem a bit the worse for wear to be wandering the streets of Madrid on your own.”

Michael pulled away from his hand. “I’m fine. You worry about your own self.”

As he pushed through the dancers he heard Harry calling, “See you at the hotel later?” but he didn’t respond. He stumbled out into the street. Even though the sun was long down, it was still warm, and a big white moon had risen, flooding the streets with blue light. He began walking, not knowing where he was going, just letting his feet take him where they would. He wanted to go home. Many times, in the last two months, he’d been filled with a sudden urge – no, stronger than that – a desperation, to start walking and leave the war behind him. He’d imagined it often, he’d even got to his feet a couple of times. To walk, his face set towards home. He could beg along the way and sleep out in the fields, the weather was fine and his father’s boots would carry him to Paris. He could find his way back to Leila’s flat, wait outside at the café with the nosy waiter, spend a couple of days there, with her, just the two of them together, and none of it wouldn’t matter any more. He tried to picture her face and couldn’t, even the colour of her hair had escaped him. But once he saw her again, it would be different, he’d forget Spain and everything that had happened, she would save him. And then, once he was saved, he could go home. He imagined it, the train to London, changing at Euston, the sunlight pouring through the glass ceiling and the crowds moving along the platforms. And then the Glasgow train, pulling up through the flat English countryside and then into Scotland, and finally into Glasgow, through the suburbs and then past Eglinton Toll. He’d look down from the train and see the Gorbals, spread out below the railway bridge, see the old theatre on Gorbals Street and the Coliseum, red sandstone glowing in the evening sun, where they held dances every so often. He’d get off the train and walk – no, he’d run - along Argyle Street and the Trongate, past Glasgow Green and over the Victoria Bridge, up Gorbals Street and along Norfolk Street and then up Cathcart Road until he got home. He’d walk in the front door – but then his mind always went blank, and he’d

realise with a shock that he couldn't remember his father's face, nor the sound of his mother's voice, and he'd resolve not to think on it again. But then a couple of days later that feeling would come over him again, a desperation to be home, to walk in the streets of his own city, a world away from this war. It was Johnny's fault, for talking about home.

But all the same, he wished Johnny was here with him now. The streets seemed very quiet, the windows all darkened. He could have been the only person in the city. Without noticing he'd turned off the main road, into a maze of narrow streets and a smell of middens. There was a dimly lit doorway up ahead and Michael could see the silhouette of a woman, standing there smoking. He'd ask directions, if he could get back to the train station he'd be able to find the hotel. As he approached she turned her head. He couldn't see the expression on her face, but her tone was coquettish.

"Good evening soldier, looking for a little company?"

Michael shook his head, not understanding. "Estación de Mediodía?"

Once he was standing before her he could see her face, a little. She was older than she seemed from her voice. "Ah, an International Brigadier," she said, putting her hand on his arm and drawing him into the doorway. "Come, come with me."

Michael followed her down the narrow hallway and into a poorly lit sitting room. She pushed him into a chair and another girl fetched him a glass of wine. The girl who'd brought him the wine was younger, with dark hair falling over her arms and a dress cut low at the front. He suddenly realised he was in a brothel. She sat next to him and put her arm round his neck.

"What is your name, soldier?"

"He's English," the older prostitute said, "or American."

"I'm Scottish," said Michael, looking at the younger girl. The idea of spending the night there, the thought of her arms around him, suddenly seemed very attractive.

She giggled. "Don't Scottish men wear skirts? With nothing underneath?"

Michael shook his head, not understanding. The older woman said something and the girl stood up and walked out of the room, looking back over her shoulder at him. Michael stood up to follow her, but the eyes of the older prostitute flicked to the corner of the room and there was a movement in the shadows. Michael hadn't even seen her sitting there, the madam he supposed, her face puffy, her wrists and fingers heavy with gold, black eyes glinting up at him.

"First, you pay," she said, her voice sharp.

Michael fumbled in his pocket and pushed some coins into her hand. She counted them through and clicked her tongue. He looked at her and she nodded, unsmiling.

The girl was waiting for him at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Taking his hand, she led him up a dimly lit flight of stairs, then across a landing. He could hear men grunting, and it seemed to him like the sound of men in pain, wounded men, he caught a glimpse through a door left ajar of a couple grappling on a bed, it looked like they were fighting, not having sex. He could hardly see where he was going in the dim light, and tripped over the start of the next set of stairs. She pulled him through the first door on the next landing. He sat down heavily on the side of the bed, putting his head in his hands. The girl knelt down in front of him and he lifted his head.

“Me llamo Carla,” she said, pushing his jacket off his shoulders and beginning to unbutton his shirt. “Como te llamas?”

Michael didn't reply. She leant back on her heels and pulled her dress over her head. She was naked underneath, full breasts catching the light, a dark patch of hair between her thighs. He could feel himself growing aroused and she pushed her hand inside his trousers and took hold of him with sure, practised movements. Unbuttoning him with the other hand, she smiled, but there was something in that smile which made Michael furious, and when she asked him his name again he snapped, “Mind your own fucking business.”

She frowned, confused, and then her expression changed to shock as he leant forward, seizing her hair in his hand and pulling her head back so he could look down into her face. But despite her expression, her hand kept on kneading him, and he knew that she was only playacting. Perhaps she thought he wanted her to appear frightened. Perhaps he did. A terrible anger flared inside him and he pushed her head down on to him so that he didn't have to see her face. She took him in her mouth and he leant back on the bed, sudden heat and wetness overcoming him, but it only spurred him on, and a moment later he leant forward again and seized her by the forearms, lifting her to her feet and then shoving her face down on to the bed. He stood over her, forcing her thighs apart with his knees while he undid his trousers, and then pulled her up by the waist and pushed his way into her, hard, one hand on her waist, the other on her shoulder, fingers dug into her skin, dragging her onto him again and again. He didn't care if he hurt her, in fact he hoped he did, he couldn't bear the thought of her face. All he could see was her back, her hair falling down on each side of her face, her hands clutching at the sheet, and he looked away, up into the shadows of the ceiling, pushing himself in and out of her harder and harder, faster and faster, but it was no use. He somehow knew he wouldn't be able to finish, he felt no pleasure, only the desire to make her feel the

pain that coursed through him. He could hear his own ragged breathing, but she hadn't made a sound, and Michael thrust one final time.

She fell on to her side, her hair covering her face, and drew her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. He collapsed on to his back. The room was spinning and he felt sick. He closed his eyes but that made it worse. There was a splashing sound, and when he opened his eyes and looked the girl was standing in a corner of the room with her back to him, washing between her legs with water from a bucket. He could barely see her in the shadows. The sounds from the other rooms seemed to grow louder and louder, until it was as if all the other couples were in the room with them. He had to get out of there, away from the sounds and the shadows and the silent girl. He stood up, pulling up his trousers, buttoning them with shaking fingers, doing up his shirt and picking his jacket up from the bed.

The walls of the narrow stairwell seemed to close around him as he staggered down, the noises of the house pressing themselves through the walls at him. Through half open doors he could see couples on beds, limbs entwined, monstrous in the dimness, and he staggered on, putting his hands against the walls to steady himself, down and brushing against the madam in the hallway. She moved to let him past and there was a clinking sound, pockets full of coins for bodies and black eyes glinting at him and almost out, at the door the same woman was standing, smoking, it seemed, the same cigarette, and then he was out in the street, taking deep gulps of hot air and stumbling along the narrow alley.

He came to a small square with a fountain in the centre and leant over it, looking for water, but it was dried out, empty apart from cigarette butts and a few dead flowers. He leant on the rim with both hands, saliva in his mouth, and then he vomited, red wine and brandy and bile splashing into the shallow stone basin. His eyes teared, his throat hurt from retching, and when he was done he wiped his mouth with his hand and turned. In front of him there was half a tenement. The rooms had been torn in two. He could see what must have been a kitchen, smashed crockery strewn across the floor, and above that a bedroom, the bed still standing in the corner, a cracked mirror on the wall, open to the elements, strips of wallpaper hanging from the ragged edge of stone, ripped open as if by a giant's hand.

A movement caught the corner of his eye and he saw an enormous rat picking its way over the rubble of below. As his eyes fell on it the rat stopped, sensing his presence perhaps, and sat up, looking at him. Michael held himself very still, and then the silence was broken by the wailing of the sirens and the buzzing of planes. The rat vanished and a moment later the sky was full of sweeping lights. Suddenly the square was full of people, mostly women dragging children by the hands, shawls trailing from their shoulders. A few men emerged

from the side street which Michael had come from, and then he saw the prostitutes. The eyes of the older woman swept over him, but the girl who'd gone upstairs with him paused when she saw him. He looked away, unable to meet her eyes, but when he looked back she was fighting against the movement of the crowd, making her way towards him. When she reached him she put her hand on his arm.

“Come, quickly, to the metro, I'll show you the way.”

“Carla!” The other woman was standing at the street corner. Her voice was sharp with worry. “Vamos!”

Michael looked at her, and then back to Carla, and his eyes filled up with tears.

She tugged on his arm. “The bombers! We have to go!”

Michael lifted her hand off his arm. She looked at him, but the other woman's voice rang out across the square again, and she stared at him before turning and running away. In a moment the square was empty again. Michael leant back against the rim of the fountain and looked up into the sky. There was an explosion, from the sound of it a few streets away, and then screaming. The sirens still wailed out and the full moon, a bomber's moon, was occasionally crossed by a plane. The sky was full of them, swooping and diving like crows. Michael sat down on the cobblestones, back against the fountain, legs stretched out before him, and lit a cigarette. He understood now that there was no use in running, no point in trying to hide. Fascist bomb or fascist bullet, it didn't make a difference.



## The Night Before

Ana had always felt a sense of loss every time a show ended its run at the theatre. During her time there she'd seen every production at least twice. For plays that she loved she would go to see them three or sometimes even four times. On the last night she would stare intently at the stage, noting every detail of the actors' movements and gestures and expressions. She would strain her ears to catch every line, every nuance in their tones, poignantly aware that it was for the last time. After the show she'd put the costumes away, wrapped in tissue paper, in the storage rooms, and then go back downstairs and move about the set before the stagehands started the get out, running her hand over the walls and the props with a strange melancholy. Frasco used to laugh at her for it.

"But you wouldn't want the same play to run forever, would you?" he'd say to her as she sat next to him in the bar afterwards, chin propped on her hands and a wistful expression on her face.

"No, but I just really liked that show."

"Well then you should be happy that you saw it," and he would shake his head, puzzled. "Besides, I'm sure another theatre somewhere will put it on in a few years. You can always go and see it then. And you've got a copy of the script too."

Despite his incomprehension she always tried to explain it to him. "But it's not the same... Even if it's on again somewhere else, it won't be done in the same way. The director will be different and the characters played by different actors. The set won't be the same, and neither will the costumes and props and lights. It wasn't just the play I liked. It was the whole production, and now it's gone forever."

He'd laugh gently at her forlorn tones. "You said to me just the other day that you were really enjoying designing the costumes for the next production, and you couldn't wait to see it. But we couldn't put it on if that show was still running. And you might like the next one even better."

Ana shook her head. "But even if I do, it won't change the fact that I liked this play too, and I'll never see it again."

"But that's the way things are. Things have to change to move forward."

She'd always end up changing the subject, because he never seemed to understand the way she thought about it. Now, as she stared about her at the walls of her apartment, she wondered if Frasco would be more saddened to leave it than her, for no matter how she fixed

every detail in her eye, or ran her hand over the walls and the furniture, no feelings of sadness came to her. In fact, no feelings at all came to her. She walked in a fixed circuit, from bed to balcony, from balcony to desk, from desk to table, from table to stove and then back to bed, searching all the while for something that would create that feeling of loss. After all, she'd spent her first two married years within these walls, the scene of a thousand happy memories. Even if she went away with Frasco to another place, it wouldn't be the same. She wanted, more than anything, to return to those days and nights before the war, to trap them in amber, to live her whole life out in those moments. It had been an idyllic time, and she could never return to it, for the theatre was closed and their favourite restaurants shut. The vibrant streets where they'd walked were empty and lifeless and their friends had been arrested, or executed, or were away at war. And now, the day after tomorrow, they'd be turning the key in the door of their home and leaving it forever. She shut her eyes and recreated in her mind her favourite memories in the apartment. The day they'd moved in and built a pyramid of boxes, the day she'd arrived home to a bath of steaming water, the evenings with Frasco scribbling at his desk, asking her to read out nonsense to make her laugh. Sharing their sleep in an interlocking puzzle of arms and legs on the bed, Frasco burning dinner on the stove and announcing that he was taking her out to eat instead, and him drawing music from the guitar as she sat on the balcony looking at the stars. Ana went through the memories methodically, like beads on a rosary, her own private invocation, and as she relived each one the sadness grew in her chest until it seemed as though it would burst. Yet at the same time she felt relief. The emptiness that she'd first felt when she'd arrived home and looked around had frightened her.

When the sadness threatened to overwhelm, she opened the wardrobe door and began to look for things to take on the journey, trying to imagine what she would need in her new life in Valencia. It was the last day before her meeting with the captain, and she needed something to keep her mind off it. She changed out of her funeral clothes into the first dress on the rail. The pearls she put back in the bag they'd been stored in, and placed them on the bed. She fetched the fur coat from the kitchen and laid that over one end of the bed. Three dresses were added to the pile, and a hairbrush, and underclothes, and a nightdress. She planned for Frasco as well, trousers and shirts, a cloth jacket that she'd made him after they were married. She lifted the clothes to her face and inhaled his scent before folding them and putting them on the bed. The papers of his half finished play were still lying on the desk, and she gathered them up and laid them on top of his clothes. Her sewing kit was still in the

theatre, but she had a smaller one at home, and she put that on the bed as well. With that she'd be able to earn her keep, no matter where they ended up..

Suddenly there was a sharp and insistent knocking on the door. Ana approached the door slowly, her heart thudding. As her hand reached the handle, the rapping recommenced.

"Who is it?" Ana called through the door.

"It's me! Open the door!" came her sister's impatient tones.

Ana sighed and turned the handle of the door. Isabella came in with a large basket over her arm. She set it down on the table with a thump and then turned to face Ana.

"Where were you last night?" she said.

"Why?" Ana said. "Did you come by?"

"I waited on your landing for two hours! I had to leave before curfew or else I would have had to walk home in the dark."

Ana shrugged. "Sorry. If I'd known you were coming I would've been sure to be at home."

"Well. I met one of your neighbours anyway, the one across the landing. A very nice woman, she invited me in to wait for you and have a cup of tea. Pasquala was her name, I think."

Ana couldn't help but roll her eyes. She could imagine, all too clearly, Pasquala's glee at having Isabella in her apartment to quiz.

"So where were you last night? You know, Pasquala told me there have been a few nights recently when you haven't come home."

Irritation flared in Ana's tone. "I was staying with a friend, though it's none of your business, nor that nosy old witch!"

Isabella narrowed her eyes triumphantly. "A male friend?"

"If all you've come for is to accuse me of having an affair while my husband's in prison, I think you should leave, Isabella," Ana said, walking angrily to the front door and holding it open.

Isabella looked injured. "Actually I came with food. You looked scrawnier than a gypsy's dog yesterday." She crossed to the table and lifted the cover. "Look. Artichoke hearts, pate, new bread – well, it was new yesterday – a chorizo, three oranges, some cheese, a cold chicken, olives, tomatoes-"

"Isabella, where did you manage to get all this?" Ana interrupted, incredulous.

Isabella winked at her. "It helps to have friends in high places."

Ana shook her head, suddenly angry. "That's exactly what's wrong with this country!" she exclaimed, flipping the lid down on the basket. "You're running round town with a basket full of olives and pate? There's children starving in Salapura, twenty minutes walk from here!"

"Don't be so ungrateful," said Isabella. "If you don't want it, go and give it to them."

Ana closed her eyes and shook her head, suddenly tired. "It's not that I don't appreciate it, Isabella. But can't you see that it's not fair? That nothing in this country is ever fair?"

Isabella shrugged. There was a brief pause before she spoke again, and when she did her tone was strange. "Who was that woman at Mama's funeral?"

Ana glanced at her, but Isabella's face was unreadable. "She's my friend, Mercedes. She's the one I've been staying with. She's been very good to me over the last while."

"How long have you known her?"

"I only met her a few weeks ago but I feel very close to her. I don't know how to explain it, but I don't know what I would've done without her. She's been like a sister to me." Isabella's expression was hurt and Ana regretted her words. "Why are you asking, anyway?"

"Well, at the reception I heard Manuel asking Aurelia who she was, and how you knew her, and when she couldn't answer him he came to me. He seemed very anxious to understand how you knew her, which I thought was strange, seeing as he disapproved of all your acquaintances before. Where did you meet her again?"

"I met her at the market," Ana said. She wasn't sure why she'd lied. She certainly wasn't protecting Manuel. Maybe it was Aurelia she was protecting.

Isabella shrugged. "Oh well."

Ana stood up. "Will you take a cup of tea?" she said over her shoulder. "I've no milk or lemon--"

"There's milk in the basket," Isabella said, her tone slightly subdued. Ana put the water on to boil and sat down in one of the soft chairs next to the stove. Isabella crossed the room and sat down on the other.

"So how did the rest of the reception go?" Ana asked.

Isabella began to list the people who'd attended, what they'd worn and what they'd talked about and what they'd eaten. As she talked Ana thought about what she'd lost, and what she'd promised to give away tomorrow. She hadn't planned to tell Isabella anything

about the captain or the events of the last few weeks, but suddenly she blurted out, “I’m leaving, Isabella.”

Isabella’s mouth fell open. “You’re what?”

Ana nodded into her silence. “I’m leaving. I’m going to Valencia.”

“When?”

“Not tomorrow evening, but the evening after that.”

“How?”

“A boat. A fisherman is taking us, at sunset.”

“Us? Who are you going with?”

Ana looked up. Isabella’s eyes were full of tears. “Frasco,” she said.

“Frasco? But I thought-”

“I’m getting him back. Tomorrow. He’s coming back to me tomorrow.” At the sound of the words, spoken aloud, her stomach turned over, her heart dipping and swooping inside her like a bird, then dropping like a stone as she remembered the cost.

“But how?”

“I can’t explain, Isabella.”

“Are – are you coming back?” Her sister’s voice was tremulous. Ana lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

“I hope so. But I don’t know if it will be possible. It depends on the war, on what happens.”

Isabella nodded jerkily, looking down. After a moment of silence she stood up abruptly. “So I lost my mother, and now I lose a sister.”

“Isabella-”

“I have to go.”

As she crossed the room Ana rose to her feet.

“I’ll come back later,” Isabella said as she lifted her bag. “Will you be in?”

“Don’t try to stop me, Isabella,” Ana said warningly. “Don’t come here with Manuel and Aurelia. I’ve made my decision. I have to go.”

The door swung closed behind Isabella, and Ana sighed. She hadn’t, until that moment, thought about the people she was leaving behind. She walked through to the bedroom and out on to the balcony. Leaning forward, she could see Isabella hurrying away down the street, lifting her hands to her face as though wiping away tears. The view from the balcony was so familiar, the streets, the trees that lined the river, the rooftops stretching away to the mountains in the distance. She’d be leaving behind her whole history when she sailed

from the port in two days time. She turned away from the view with a sigh and continued the difficult task of choosing what to take with her, and what to leave behind forever.

Once Ana had packed all the things she was taking into a battered leather suitcase that belonged to Frasco, she tied a scarf around her hair and began to clean the house. She wasn't sure why she was cleaning it. It was tidy already and they were leaving in two days, but she wanted the house to be spotless. It was the last thing she could do for this place where she'd been so happy, at first, and then so unhappy. As she was shaking her bedclothes over the balcony, there was a knock at the door. When she opened it Isabella was back, her cheeks flushed, her hair askew.

"What happened to you?" Ana asked. Her sister was usually so neat, not a hair out of place. Isabella had dropped into a chair, out of breath.

"I ran," she explained, lifting her hair off the back of her neck and stretching her legs out.

"Ran? From who?" Ana tried to picture her older sister sprinting through the streets.

"I didn't want to miss you again."

"Oh."

Isabella started rummaging through her handbag. "I went to Aurelia's house," she said, "and I told her that you were leaving-"

"You told her about Frasco?" Ana was dismayed. "Why did you do that? You know that she tells Manuel everything! All he has to do is drop a word in one of his officer friends' ears-"

"Relax," said Isabella, her tone aggrieved. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I only told her that you were leaving the city, going to Valencia. I didn't mention Frasco's name, though she did."

"What did she say?"

"She asked if you were leaving to meet him on the other side of the border."

Ana waited, but Isabella didn't speak for a moment, still searching through her handbag. She tried to keep the impatience out of her voice. "And?"

"I said I didn't know why you were leaving, and then she said you'd be better off on the other side of the border, but to tell you that the red part of the map is shrinking rapidly, and you'll be pushed all the way to France."

Ana raised an eyebrow sceptically, her tone dismissive. "And how does Aurelia know all that? Have a direct line to El Generale himself, does she?"

Isabella shrugged. "Manuel buys the newspapers."

"They're nothing but propaganda."

"Even so. Aurelia said you should think about that before leaving, though she doesn't care one way or the other."

Ana tried to ignore the sting of the last words but Isabella must have seen the expression on her face. Her tone softened.

"I don't think she meant it though, Anacita. She's just – she's never forgiven you for marrying Frasco, and turning your back on the family."

"I didn't turn my back on anyone, Isabella. You turned your backs on me."

"I didn't! I came to your wedding, didn't I, with Pedro?"

"Well, they didn't, Mama and Aurelia. What did I do that was so wrong? I married a man I loved, and that loved me. What was so terrible about that?"

Isabella lifted her shoulders and then let them fall again in an expressive shrug. "It was the times, the politics of the time. It never made a difference to me where someone put their cross on the ballot paper. Remember all the leaflets and newspapers? Remember the stories about the students fighting at the university? Personally I don't understand what all the fuss was about, and I don't see how Frasco's politics made a difference to his suitability as your husband."

Ana raised an eyebrow as Isabella continued. "I mean, I know I said it would have been better if he'd been a Falangist instead of a Socialist, but that was mostly because of Mama and Aurelia's reaction, and I still don't really understand that."

"I do," said Ana. "It was those priests, filling her head and Aurelia's too, and Manuel. He hated me even before I met Frasco, just because I lived by myself and I worked in the Ciudatanos, and because I wasn't frightened of him – the exact opposite of everything he thought a woman should be. Do you remember when he said I worked for a pack of faggots, harlots and Socialists?"

Isabella started to laugh. "He's certainly got a turn of phrase, that's for sure."

Ana pulled her feet up underneath her and rested her chin on her knee, her arms encircling her leg. "I wish things had been different with Aurelia, you know," she said, her tone serious.

"She was jealous," said Isabella simply.

"Jealous?" said Ana. "Why on earth would she be jealous of me?"

"Because you were Papa's favourite."

Ana knew this was the truth, and that any denial would be insincere, but all the same she was surprised. Aurelia had always been the closest to their mother, helping her in the kitchen while Ana was out running the streets, and then when they were older Aurelia would sit in, playing cards with her and keeping her company while Ana was working in the shop. “But she always spent more time with Mama,” she said. “She was more like Mama than either of us. We were both more like Papa.”

“She wanted to be like Mama because Papa loved her so much,” said Isabella. “I remember the day you started in the shop. Aurelia was sick with jealousy. You even looked like Papa, dark like him and taller than us, the same sense of humour, the same way with people you met.”

“Well that’s not my fault,” Ana said.

“And she was furious when you took the job in the theatre.”

“Why? She told me I was a disgrace to the family!”

“But it was glamorous, and exciting, and she was jealous.”

Ana pulled a face, thinking of the days she had spent blistering her fingers on needles in the wardrobe rooms in the sweltering heat of summer. “Hardly glamorous,” she said.

Isabella shrugged. “More exciting than what she was doing, that’s for sure. You were coming round with your stories of parties and opening nights, and Aurelia was sitting in the house with her rosary beads. And then Frasco too. Wouldn’t you rather be married to a handsome writer than a bullying businessman?”

Ana smiled a little, trying to imagine herself married to Manuel.

“I just don’t want you to think too badly of her, Ana. I know that three years is a long time, but I don’t want you to go away thinking that she hates you, because I know that she doesn’t.”

Ana looked around the apartment. “It still doesn’t seem real that I’ll be leaving here,” she said. Isabella didn’t reply, and there was a moment of silence. Ana’s mind filled with the magnitude of what she was planning to do. She would be leaving everything behind; her family, her city, her past. When she looked up again tears were glittering in Isabella’s eyes. She blinked them away and leant forward, pushing an envelope into Ana’s hands.

“I thought it had fallen out of my bag while I was running,” she said, “but I found it.”

There was a bundle of notes. She slid them a little out of the envelope and fanned them out, realising with a shock just how much money there was there. Raising her eyes to Isabella’s, she said slowly, “What is this, Isabella? Where did it come from?”



“It doesn’t matter where it comes from,” said Isabella. “I want you to take it for Valencia. You’ll need it.”

Ana shook her head and thrust the notes back into the envelope. “I’m not taking it Isabella, unless you tell me where it came from.”

“It’s the money I keep from my housekeeping money each month,” she said, “Well, some of it is. Some of it is Aurelia’s. And we went to the pawnshop together. I pawned my brooch and Aurelia pawned some of the jewellery that Manuel’s given her.”

Ana held the envelope out to Isabella. “Thank you Isabella. I appreciate it, and tell Aurelia the same. But I can’t take the money.”

When Isabella spoke her voice was exasperated. “Don’t be so proud, Ana! We’re your sisters, and you didn’t ask us for the money. We wanted to give it to you.” Her tone softened. “Don’t refuse the last thing we can do for you. Don’t take that away from us.”

Ana slowly withdrew the envelope, placing it next to her on the chair. “At least take the money back for the jewellery.”

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “It’s just jewellery. It doesn’t matter.”

Ana got up from her chair and knelt in front of Isabella’s chair, wrapping her arms around her sister. “Thank you, Isabella,” she said, her voice muffled.

“Aiya!” Isabella exclaimed. “Your bones are all sticking into me.” Ana drew back and smiled at her. “Did you not eat any of the food I brought you?”

Ana shook her head. “I wasn’t hungry,” she said, “but I am a little, now. Will you not take something too?”

“Maybe some of the bread, and a slice of chorizo,” said Isabella. “Will I put tea on?”

The two sisters set the table and laid out some food. As they ate they slipped into reminiscing about their childhoods, stories which sent a pang through Ana’s heart, even as she laughed. Towards the end of the meal Isabella glanced at the sky outside the window.

“I’d better go soon,” she said. “It’ll be dark before long.”

“I’ll walk you to the river,” said Ana, rising from the table. She threw a shawl over her shoulders and they went together out of the door and down the stairs. As they walked along the street Isabella turned to Ana. “You’ll write, Ana, won’t you?” she said, her tone anxious. “I’ll worry about you, you know, and I’m sure Aurelia will too. You’re our baby sister after all.”

Ana nodded and took Isabella’s hand in her own, though no warmth came from her sister’s skin to her own. “Of course I’ll write, Isabella. And you’ll thank Aurelia from me, for the money.”

“Yes.”

They went on hand in hand, as they had walked when they were children, and before long reached the bridge where Ana was to meet Mercedes and Antonia the next morning. Isabella turned to face her. The last of the light fell across her face and Ana lifted a hand to her sister’s cheek.

“Thank you for everything, Isabella,” she said.

Isabella looked up, her face a bright mask of tears. “Safe journey Ana.” Though neither of them voiced it, they were both wondering if they’d ever see each other again. After a long moment Isabella turned and walked across the bridge. Ana stood and watched her go, her figure getting smaller and smaller and then finally turning down a street on the other side and vanishing from sight. Heavy at heart, she turned her steps homewards.

When she arrived back at her apartment she packed the remaining food into the basket that Isabella had brought, and placed it next to the suitcase, by the door. She looked around, satisfied that everything was as it should be. Then she went through to the bedroom and opened the doors to the balcony. She sat down in a chair, wrapping her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, and allowed memories to settle around her. The moon rose above the rooftops, the air grew colder and colder, but Ana sat on. She didn’t know what would happen to her tomorrow. Her heart was all she had to offer the captain. Whether it was a heart that had truly loved, she didn’t know. She was frightened at the thought of their appointment, at the thought of what he might take from her. But fear wouldn’t help her, and she pushed it away. Fear wouldn’t matter, as long as Frasco came back. At the thought an agitated excitement filled her body and she imagined his arms around her, his lips against her skin, the sound of his voice in her ear. Over the last two years her memories had become faded and dog-eared at the edges. She’d taken them out and looked at them so often they’d lost all sense of immediacy, becoming memories of memories, but now, with Frasco so close, they had regained their vivid quality. She gazed out across the city to the area where the military headquarters was situated. Maybe he was within those walls right now. She had a sudden impulse to get up, to run through the streets, to hammer on the doors with her fists, calling for him. But she’d wait until tomorrow, until her appointment with the captain.

## The Ebro, September 1938

Nobody would say why they'd all been gathered, although rumours rustled round the group like the leaves overhead. "We're being sent home", "no we're been deployed to another front", "the Republic are surrendering". Michael ignored the talk, focusing instead on the way the sun was falling through the trees, on to the faces of the men. Some of them were illuminated, the light showing up too clearly the lines around their eyes and the shadows underneath, the hollows in their cheeks, the grey in their beards, the faded, fraying collars of their uniforms. Most were in the shadow, like him and Johnny, sitting as they were where the cover was thickest, away from the centre of the clearing. But even in the shade, it was still as hot as hell. All of the men had dark patches under their arms, in the centre of their backs, and Michael knew he was no different. He barely noticed the smell of unwashed bodies in the heat any more. It was a smell of life, at least, of sweating, living, moving bodies, far preferable to the stench of putrid flesh that came on the wind when it blew from the direction of no man's land. Michael had nightmares about them, the bodies left lying out there that swelled up with the heat, the insects that swarmed over them, the rats that nibbled at them. Sometimes the bodies were so decayed that they were barely recognisable as human, apart from the shreds of uniform left, but sometimes, in his dreams, they had the faces of his friends.

"Got a light?" Johnny nudged him in the side, jolting him out of his thoughts. "What?"

"A light, a light," Johnny said, the cigarette moving up and down in his mouth with the movement of the words. "Who're you dreaming about?"

"Nobody," said Michael, leaning to the side and digging his matches out of his pocket. "Here."

Johnny lit his cigarette, and then took off his cap and used it to mop his forehead. "Fuck me it's hot."

"Aye."

A murmur went round the group as Sam, the battalion commander, arrived.

"Well boys, it was announced today." His voice was loud in the sudden hush. "The International Brigades are being disbanded. They want us to go home." When Michael looked round he couldn't tell relief from disappointment in the others' faces. Johnny said nothing next to him, just sat there smoking in silence.

“Why? Is the Republic surrendering?” A voice from the back, a Welsh boy whose name Michael couldn’t remember.

“No, they’re not. But there’s some idea that if the Republic withdraws its foreign assistance, Franco will follow suit.”

“That’ll be right!” Peter, down the front.

“Well that’s the orders.”

Most of the men were looking at one another, unsure how to react. They’d come to fight for a cause, but they were going home with fascism undefeated. It wasn’t how Michael had imagined it would end. He looked at Johnny again, but his face was impassive.

“But the Republic still has one more thing to ask from us all, and that’s for us to hold the line here, until they have time to send up replacements. What do you think? Will you stay, hold the line?”

They looked from one to the other, most nodding slowly. Some of the men looked unsure, and Michael heard someone mutter behind him, “That’s hard, to send us back up the line just when we’ve been told we’re getting home.”

The meeting broke up after a few more minutes, and the men began to disperse through the trees. Michael walked along beside Johnny.

He looked at Michael, but his tone was strangely flat as he said, “We’re getting home, Mickey.”

Three days later Peter called a company meeting.

“There’s going to be a Fascist offensive, tomorrow morning. They’ve got information that they’re planning to push through the line here, and here, and here.” He pointed to the places on a map, spread out on the ground before them, weighed down with rocks at the corners to stop it flapping in the breeze. It was a large map, worn at the creases, with unidentifiable stains. As Peter talked Michael let his mind wander, looking at the map, searching for the Pyrenees, Madrigueras, Brunete, Jarama, Belchite, the mountains of Aragon, Madrid, tracing his route around Spain. He realised he’d seen more of Spain than he’d ever seen of his own country. Peter had stopped talking, and Michael looked up. Most of the men were standing with their hands in their pockets, downcast expressions on their faces. Peter looked round the group. “I know that we were told we’re going home a couple of days ago,” he said, “and that’s why this isn’t an order. It’s a request.”

Nobody replied, and after a pause he continued. “I’ve been proud to serve as company commander, proud to call you my company. And if any of you decide you don’t want to

fight tomorrow, I won't be any less proud. Nobody can say you haven't done your duty. But I'll be fighting tomorrow. I came over here to defeat fascism, and we're not getting to finish that. But I'll be fucked if the fascists'll get through my line before I go."

"I'll hold the line," said Bill.

"Good man," said Peter.

"I'm with you," said George.

"And me," said Johnny.

Michael nodded his head.

One by one the company all agreed to stay in the fight until the orders came through for them to leave.

"Right then," said Peter, looking round. "Attack at dawn tomorrow."

That night they got a double ration of wine. The atmosphere was strange. A lot of the men were jubilant, talking about what they were going to do when they got home, the first meal they'd get their mothers or wives to make them, the first pint down their local, but their laughter was strained. When they were given their wine, Michael and Johnny, in unspoken agreement, left the mess and started walking. It was dark, no moon, but the stars were bright, as bright as Michael had ever seen them.

"I can't be fucked with all that talk," Johnny said. "Planning your first pint? What a load of shite."

Michael glanced at him, surprised.

Johnny raised his cup. "I mean, I've got quite used to the wine."

There were footsteps behind them.

"All right?" It was Bill. "Where are you two away to? Not deserting on the eve of battle?"

Michael grinned. "Nah, we're just escaping the crowd for a bit, if you fancy a walk."

"All right."

The three of them walked in silence until they came to the olive grove where they'd been gathered earlier that day. Johnny settled himself on a fallen tree trunk, stretching his legs out in front of him and lighting a cigarette. Michael sat down on the ground. He balanced his cup on the grass and dug around in his pockets for his cigarettes. Bill put his cup down on the ground and started walking back and forth across the grass.

"Shite," Michael said. "I think I've left my cigarettes in the mess. Can I tap one of yours, Johnny?"

“Chancer,” Johnny said, but he tossed him the packet anyway.

“It’s all shit,” Bill burst out suddenly, his voice tight and unhappy.

Johnny and Michael looked at one another, startled.

“What’s shit?” said Johnny.

“All this first meal, first girl, first pint shit.”

“You’re telling me,” said Johnny, leaning back and exhaling.

Bill shook his head. “I don’t want to go home.”

Neither Johnny nor Michael said anything. They were both thinking of Eddie, of that day in Belchite, when they’d met Bill in the street, covered in his brother’s blood. The silence stretched out, and Bill rubbed his hand roughly over his eyes.

“Your – your mam’ll understand, Bill,” said Michael.

“She won’t. She told me to look after him, and now...How can I go back? Her heart’ll be broken over this.”

“All the more reason for you to go back to her,” Johnny said.

“I wish it’d been me,” said Bill, his voice cracking. “It’s my fault, he followed me everywhere all his life, but I shouldn’t have let him follow me here. God forgive me for taking him to all those fucking meetings.”

Johnny stood up and put his hand on Bill’s shoulder. “Eddie was a grown man, Bill. He made a fine, brave choice, and it was his. Leave him that.”

Bill nodded, rubbing at his eyes again.

Johnny bent down and picked up Bill’s cup, handing it to him. “Here, drink your drink.” They both sat down on the tree trunk, and the three of them sat there and drank without speaking.

The heavy guns started up while it was still dark, and the planes would come as soon as they had light to see by, Michael guessed. He was crouched down in the trench, checking his rifle, strapping his ammunition pouch to his waist, clipping grenades to his belt, thinking about the machines they were fighting against as he did so. The heavy guns, dark metal that glinted in the sun, the tanks that trundled over the earth like huge prehistoric insects, the planes that swept through the sky, many of them named after moths or birds, though their droning hum had always reminded him of mosquitoes. Against metal and fire, the men preparing for battle around him seemed very small and frail. The soldiers were the least of all the weapons at the disposal of the generals, but they paid the most. Above all, Michael’s time in Spain had brought home to him the frailty of the human body. Crouching there, retying the

laces of his father's boots with hands that only trembled slightly now, he was very aware of his own body. He remembered the first battle, at Brunete, his hands shaking so badly he couldn't tie his boots, Johnny standing smoking, saying nothing, Charlie rattling on about the cause, Eddie with his face pale, Bill cracking jokes.

"All right, Michael?" Bill's voice broke into his thoughts.

Michael straightened up. "Aye, how you doing?"

"Not bad."

"Sleep well?"

"So so. Where's Johnny?"

"Shaving," said Michael, nodding in the direction that Johnny had taken.

"He's what? You having a laugh?"

"I am not."

"Let's go and find him," said Bill, shaking his head. As they started walking he slung his arm over Michael's shoulders. "You know, I was thinking today, the three of us must be the longest serving out of the whole company. It's only fitting we hold this line together."

"Peter too," said Michael. "He came down with us from Glasgow."

"He's done well," said Bill, "to get to company commander."

"Aye, he's a good leader," said Michael.

"Jesus Christ, will you look at that," said Bill.

Michael looked up. Behind the line was a hive of activity, men hurrying everywhere in the last ten minutes before it was time to go over, carrying guns, boxes of ammunitions, pieces of paper, strapping on grenades, people shouting over the sound of the artillery, running to their positions, and there, in the middle of the chaos, was Johnny. He was sitting in a jeep that had been hastily parked at an angle, with the mirror angled down, shaving himself carefully, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"What the fuck are you up to?" said Bill, leaning on the door.

Johnny shrugged. "It was the only mirror I could find."

"Whose car is this?" said Michael.

"I don't know."

"Don't know why you're bothering with that," said Peter, walking up. "Sure you'll have a five o'clock shadow in about ten minutes."

Johnny wiped the blade of his razor on his sleeve, folding it up and tucking it into his top pocket, wiping the soap away from the base of his neck and below his ears. "Want to look

my best for Franco's lads, seeing as it's our last engagement." He emptied the cup of soapy water out on to the ground and jumped down from the jeep, landing lightly.

"Where did you find soap?" asked Bill.

Johnny winked. "I charmed it out of that wee nurse at the medical station down the road. Now, am I not as handsome as the devil himself?"

Peter shook his head. "You're something else, I'm telling you."

George came running up. "Why aren't you three in the line? Peter, Sam's looking for you."

Michael looked up at the sky, turning to pink in the east. It was almost time.

"See yous in a bit then lads," said Peter over his shoulder as he walked away with George.

Bill, Johnny and Michael headed back towards the line. Just as they got to the rest of the group, the planes came over. It was getting lighter and lighter, and Michael could see the dark forms of soldiers at the base of the hill. He settled his rifle and aimed, but he didn't hit anything, as far as he could see. He saw a few grenades bouncing down the hill towards the Nationalist soldiers as he reloaded and fired again. Suddenly the hillside below them exploded, a crater blown in the ground. They crouched and covered their heads as soils and stones showered down on them.

"Fucking bombers," shouted Johnny. "They'll be running up under cover of that."

Just then, a grenade came over the top of their defences and landed between Michael and Bill. They looked at one another for a minute. Bill nodded. Then he grabbed the grenade and jumped over the top.

"Bill!" Michael yelled, climbing after him. He was running full pelt down the hill. Michael started after him, as fast as he could, his rifle in one hand, his ammunition bouncing off his waist, crouched low, zigzagging to avoid fire.

"Mickey, what the fuck are you doing!" Michael heard Johnny's voice behind him, but he ignored him. He knew what Bill was going to do, and he wouldn't let him. Through the smoke and dust, in the grey dawn light, he kept his eye on Bill, only a few metres ahead of him, just beyond the crater left by the bomb.

"Mickey, what the fuck!" Johnny's voice was louder than it should have been, and when Michael looked back over his shoulder he realised that Johnny had followed him. He looked forward, back to Bill, and just then there was an explosion in front of him and Bill was gone. He staggered backwards and tried to reach behind him. His mind went white, his eyes dark, the sounds of the battle disappeared and pain radiated from his shoulder through



his entire body. Then somebody yanked at him, a sharp jolt of agony that brought him too clearly to his senses. He was half kneeling, half lying on the ground, and with perfect clarity he saw all at once the grass in front of him, and Johnny behind him, holding his stomach with one hand and dragging Michael with the other, blood between his fingers and the soldiers coming up towards them, and the soldiers firing from the parapet behind them, the smoke from the guns drifting across the hillside, the planes swooping through the sky overhead, the bullets whizzing by his ears, and the sun coming up over the hills. Then the ground went away from under him and he tumbled downwards, soil and stones against his face and hands, pain sending white hot spears through his body, and when he came to a stop he was in the bottom of the bomb crater with Johnny.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Johnny was sitting up, his knees bent up towards his chest, his hands pressed against his stomach.

“Bill-”

“He’s dead.”

“I know.”

Johnny took his hands away from his stomach. They were covered in blood, it spread outwards in a darkening circle. “Fuck me.”

“Jesus Christ, Johnny,” Michael said, pulling himself up into a sitting position.

“It’s all right, Mickey. How’s your arm?”

“It’s my shoulder,” Michael said. It was a mess of blood and flesh and soil, the material of his uniform buried deep in the wound.

Johnny reached into his pocket, wincing as he did so. There was a moment of stillness. The sounds of the battle seemed curiously far away. “Shite. I left my cigarettes in that jeep. Can you tap us a smoke? You owe us one anyway.” Blood dripped from the edge of his shirt on to the ground between them, already darkened with the blood running down Michael’s arm.

“I owe you more than that,” said Michael.

Johnny grinned, but it looked like an effort. “Aye, that’s true. Maybe three or four.”

Michael took his cigarettes out of his pocket. “Chancer,” he said, his eyes filling up with tears.

Johnny lit his cigarette and exhaled. They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Michael looked up towards the top of the crater but he couldn’t still see anything of what was going on. He shifted his shoulder and pain shot down his arm and across his chest.

“You were right, Mickey,” Johnny said, pressing his hand back against his stomach. Blood trickled down between his fingers, pooling in his lap, dribbling on to the ground.

“About what?”

“About Charlie. We should’ve gone back for him that minute, when we realised he wasn’t with us. I shouldn’t have stopped you.”

“I shouldn’t have blamed you,” said Michael.

“It’s all right,” said Johnny, shaking his head. “I blame myself. I should’ve looked after him better, made sure he was ahead of us when we were running back to the boats. I wasn’t even with him when he got shot. I never even saw it happen. He was all by himself. I loved that boy, I did. I should never have left him behind.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Johnny. Charlie knew why he was here. He knew the risks, but he believed in the cause, that’s why he came, like the rest of us came.”

They sat and listened to the sound of the guns, of the planes, of the rifle fire for a minute, before Johnny spoke again. “Listen Mickey,” he said, “I need to tell you something.”

Michael shook his head.

“I want to tell you – I want you to know why I came to Spain. I need to ask you-”

“Jesus Johnny,” said Michael. “Tell me when we’re both in the hospital. We’ll need something to talk about in between flirting with the nurses-”

“Let me speak, fuck’s sake,” said Johnny. He inhaled again and Michael looked down at the ground. The dark patch made by their blood was spreading, growing larger. He tapped a cigarette out of the packet for himself and tried to lift his arm to strike a match, but couldn’t. Johnny reached over and took his cigarette out of his mouth, lighting it off his own and passing it back.

“Cheers,” said Michael, taking a long, shaky draw.

“You know I’ve never been political, like the rest of the lads. I mean, I saw the point to it once I was here, but I’ve never been the way the rest of them are with it, the way you are.”

“The way I was,” said Michael.

“Aye, well,” said Johnny. He flicked away the end of his cigarette. “Give us another one, eh?”

Michael passed the packet over and Johnny lit another.

“I got a girl in trouble,” Johnny said. “That’s why I came.” He wasn’t looking at Michael, but upwards, at the sky. The sun was well up now, the sky overhead pale blue, morning blue. Michael didn’t say anything, and after a moment he continued. “Maggie

McBride.” He shifted his weight and winced again. “Black hair, blue eyes.” He jerked his head upwards. “The colour of that sky up there. She’d a temper on her, no doubt about that, but she was the best dancer in Brighton.”

Michael didn’t know what to say. He’d not heard that tone in Johnny’s voice before, but he recognised it. “Where – how did you meet her?”

Johnny smiled, something before his eyes that Michael had never suspected. “I was at a dance in the town and a fight broke out, some boys from Townhead down to cause trouble. Her wee brother was in the thick of it, though I only found that out after. The first I saw of her, I looked across the room, over the fight, and I saw her standing up on a chair with a glass in her hand, flung it, with perfect aim, at the head of one of the Townhead boys, and after that she jumped down and got stuck in, all wild black curls and flashing blue eyes, and I looked at her and I thought, her, that girl, she’s the one for me. I was never a one woman kind of man, but nobody else ever caught my eye when I was with her.” He paused. “We’d been walking out together since the summer when she came to see me, just after the New Year, told me she was three months gone.”

“What did you do?”

Johnny shook his head. “I told her...I told her to get it seen to, go to a woman, whatever it is that girls do. But she said she wouldn’t, she said I’d have to marry her. I said would I hell, and a week later I signed up, and a week after that I was on that train with you.”

Michael didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

“We’ve been here a year and half, now,” said Johnny. “The child would’ve been born a year ago. I’ve got a daughter, or a son, that’ll never know me.”

“Johnny-”

“You’ll remember the name, Mickey? Maggie McBride, from Brighton, with black hair and blue eyes. Just – when you get back, go and see her, make sure she’s all right. Her and the child. You don’t need to tell her anything, but make sure they’re all right.”

“I won’t say I’ll do it, you can do it yourself, we’re getting out of here and everything’ll be fine.”

“Aye, Mickey, all right,” said Johnny, leaning his head back against the wall of the crater and closing his eyes. Michael wondered how long it would take for the Nationalists to get up the hill and find them. He was suddenly tired, a great weariness settling over him, but he didn’t want to sleep. He wanted to stay awake, even in the chaos around them, even if it meant listening to the guns and the screams and the whining of the planes. The ground shook

below them and he wondered if another bomb had been dropped. He looked at Johnny, but his eyes were still closed.

“Johnny.”

“It’s all right, Mickey. You’re right. We’ll be all right. Pass us another cigarette, will you?”

Michael took the last two cigarettes out of the packet, crumpling it up in his good hand and tossing it away. He passed them both to Johnny, who lit them, and passed one back. They smoked in silence and Michael leant his head back. The sky was still blue above them and he thought about Charlie, wishing he was there with them. No, not there with them, wounded and waiting in the bottom of a hole in the hillside. Instead Michael wished to go back. He thought about the first time the three of them met, in Perpignan, before they’d gone over the Pyrenees. That hillside station, when they’d arrived, all together as the sun was coming up. Or walking home from the pub in Madrigueras, when they’d just been training, before anyone had been killed, before they knew what war was and could still sing their way along the road. Or that day in Jarama when the truck had come by playing music and they’d all started dancing. He took a last drag on his cigarette and tossed it away. And now it had come to this, the two of them sitting in a hole, waiting for the Fascists to come and finish them off. He looked across at Johnny, who was sitting with his head bowed, and thought of that time he’d seen him dancing with the girl in Madrid, a year ago now, with the lights down low and tears in his eyes. Michael saw the cigarette was hanging from Johnny’s lip, a long tail of ash drooping from the tip.

“Johnny, your cigarette.”

He leant across with his good arm and nudged Johnny’s shoulder. The cigarette fell from his mouth, scattering ash all over his chest, and rolled down his torso, coming to rest against his hands, which were still clasped over his wound. Michael picked the cigarette off him and tossed it away. He shook him again.

“Johnny. Johnny.”

His head slumped to the side, his eyes open but empty. Michael leant back and closed his eyes.

## The Final Meeting

As Ana approached the bridge the next morning, she could see Mercedes and Antonia, two motionless figures silhouetted against the ceaseless movement of the water. As she drew closer Mercedes raised her hand in a gesture of welcome.

“Hola,” Mercedes said, her voice sombre. Ana pressed her hands.

“Thank you for coming today. And you, Antonia.”

“Are you sure about your decision, sister?” Mercedes’ voice was heavy with misgiving. “Are you sure that this is the right thing?”

Ana nodded slowly. “I have made my decision. I know what I must do. But promise me you won’t tell Frasco what has happened. Promise me.”

Mercedes sighed. “As you wish, Ana.”

The three women turned their steps towards the city centre. Every step was an effort for Ana. There was a paralysing heaviness in her chest. The captain had already taken away so much from her, a way of seeing, a way of touching. What would happen to her when he took her heart?

They arrived at the military headquarters too soon. The doorway rose before them, dark and imposing, heavy pillars on each side. Ana paused for a moment before it and looked at Mercedes and Antonia.

“Shall we wait out here, sister, or inside with you?”

“Inside,” said Antonia sharply.

Ana glanced at her, puzzled by her tone. She nodded in agreement. “Would you come inside with me? I – I don’t want to be alone any more than I can help it.”

They began their slow ascent of the wide stone steps.

At the desk in the hallway the secretary pursed up her mouth in disapproval. Ana imagined how they must contrast with the officers’ wives, two prostitutes and a seamstress, worn down by two years of poverty, and a bitter smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Ana Valledares,” she said when she reached the desk. The woman’s eyes slid down the book in front of her and she nodded brusquely.

“Wait in the hallway upstairs.”

Ana started walking up the stairs.

“Your companions?” the secretary asked, eyebrows raised, mouth pursed.

Ana turned back. “The Capitán wished to see them also,” she said quickly.

“Very well.” She motioned them onwards with a tight little gesture of her hand.

They climbed the stairs slowly, Ana leaning on Mercedes' arm for support. When they reached the familiar hallway the three of them sat on the bench where Ana had sat, three weeks before. She remembered that first morning so clearly; the sunlight moving across the tiles and the dust motes sparkling in the light, the cotton of her gloves twisting against the palms of her hands and the trickle of sweat down the curve of her spine. An eternity seemed to pass before the door opened. The captain moved his hand as if to beckon her in, but stopped at the sight of the other two women.

"Who are your companions, Senora?" he said, eyebrows raised.

Terror had strangled her vocal cords. It was Mercedes who spoke, her voice higher than usual and with a fluttering, silly tone.

"I am here with my sister, mi capitán, my baby sister, to be with her on this day of happiness."

Ana almost turned with surprise but the firm pressure of Mercedes' hand on hers prevented her. The captain nodded, his eyes half amused.

"You shall wait for your sister here," he said, his tone one of a man used to giving orders. He turned to Antonia. "And you?" he demanded.

Ana exhaled. He hadn't recognised her. When Antonia turned her eyes on the captain they were lit by a sudden brilliance of fury and despair, but her voice, when she spoke, was whiny and ingratiating.

"I have come, mi capitán, to beg for my husband. He is in prison--"

"I will see you after Senora Valledares," he said, a small smile playing across his thin lips. Ana could hear the same greed in his voice that she'd heard at their first meeting. How many women had there been? She glanced at Antonia before realising the captain was standing in the doorway, his eyes fastened upon her, waiting for her to enter the room. She stood up, unsteady on her feet. The captain allowed the door to swing shut behind her, and crossed the room to behind his desk. Ana sank into the chair without waiting for it to be offered. The captain sat down slowly, leaning forward, his hands placed on the desk, palms flat to the wood.

"Well, Ana," he said, "you have come."

"Of course," she said, her voice weak.

"But I see you have come empty-handed this week."

Ana nodded and spread her hands out, palms up. "Sí, capitán."

"Tell me Ana," he said, "how do you feel?"

She looked up, puzzled.

“It’s not a trick question. I want to know.”

“I feel fear,” said Ana. “I feel excitement too, and love, and sadness. I feel grief and nostalgia. I feel loyalty and affection, and gratitude. I feel hope.”

The captain’s eyes gleamed.

“Tell me, Ana,” he said again. “You have come with nothing. Does that mean that you are offering your heart?”

“I am, capitán.”

“And you think that you have a heart that has truly loved?”

Ana held her head up and looked straight into the blackness of his eyes. “I have a heart that has loved, and suffered, and hoped,” she said.

The captain nodded. “Very well, Ana,” he said. “I accept.”

When Ana opened her eyes she was lying on the couch in the anteroom, as before. She swung her legs over the side of the couch and stood up with difficulty. One hand on the wall, she moved around the sides of the room until she reached the door that led into the captain’s office. There were two men sitting opposite one another at the desk; the captain and another, with dark curly hair, who had been sitting with his back to her. At the sound of the door scraping open he turned, and on seeing Ana, leapt out of his chair and across the room towards her.

Ana looked at him, and felt nothing.

He reached her and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her into his embrace, her face buried in his neck. “Querida mia,” he said into her hair. “Querida mia, querida mia.”

She placed a hand on his back, and felt nothing.

“Frasco,” she said. He held her a little away from him and looked at her face. The colour drained from his skin and Ana became aware of a great flat emptiness inside her.

“Ana,” he said. His fingers were tight on her shoulders, digging into her skin. She gazed at him indifferently, and he shook her a little, the joy in his eyes fading quickly. “Ana!” He turned to the captain furiously.

“What have you done to her?”

The captain lifted his shoulders and smiled slightly. “Nothing that Ana didn’t herself agree to, Senor Barea.”

Frasco released Ana’s shoulders and took a step towards the captain. “Tell me what you have done to my wife!”

“Senor Barea!” The captain’s voice battered at Ana’s mind. She leant back against the wall in a daze, gazing at the doorway.

“I’ll remind you where you were taken from two days ago, and I’ll remind you also that you can be put back there if I so choose, despite your wife’s sacrifices. Now take her home.”

Frasco turned back to Ana. “Come, Ana, amor mio.”

They moved slowly towards the door, the captain’s eyes following them. When they stepped out into the hallway Mercedes stood up, her hand over her mouth.

“Oh Ana,” she said. “Ana.”

The captain stood in the doorway behind them, eyes on Antonia. “Senora?” he said. Antonia nodded and rose from her seat. As she drew level with Ana she looked directly at her and Ana, looking back, recognised herself in Antonia’s eyes. She turned to watch her enter the captain’s office. The captain stepped aside to let her enter and then moved to shut the door. As he did, there was a flash, light off a blade. Antonia moved quickly behind him and slid the knife into his flesh, driving up into his heart, placing as she did so a hand upon his chest, laying it there gently, like a lover. She looked straight at Ana and smiled.

“Go, sister,” she said.

Ana stood and stared at her, unmoving, until the door swung shut and the pressure of Frasco and Mercedes’ hands forced her forwards, down the stairs, into the morning light. As they walked quickly along the street Ana gazed ahead blankly.

“Who are you, Senora?” That was Frasco’s voice, over her head.

“I am a friend of Ana’s,” Mercedes said. “We met a few weeks ago,” she jerked her head back in the direction of the offices, “after she went to that bastardo for the first time.”

“What has happened?”

“What is important now is that you both leave here. The city is crawling with informers.”

As they walked, Mercedes told him that Ana had arranged passage to Valencia, telling him about the port and Salvador but he shook his head.

“Valencia is no good,” he said grimly. “The Republic is failing. We need to get to Barcelona and across the Pyrenees, into France.”

“The fisherman refused to go further than Valencia. He said it was too dangerous.”

“Well we’ll have to find another way of reaching Barcelona once we get to Valencia. Are you coming with us?”



There was a pause. They had reached the river, and they stood there for a moment, the three of them. Mercedes reached out and took one of Ana's hands in hers. Ana turned her eyes on Mercedes, and then let them fall again.

"No," said Mercedes. "I can't leave."

Frasco nodded and put his hand on her arm. "Thank you for everything you've done, Mercedes. If you change your mind, you know when we're leaving, and from where."

Mercedes stepped forwards and put her arms around Ana, her hand against the back of Ana's head, as she would hold a child.

"Thank you, Mercedes," said Ana.

"Goodbye, sister." She turned and walked away along the river, a tall figure under the crimson branches, as leaves drifted slowly down to the stones under their feet.

When they entered the apartment, Frasco stood in the doorway, looking around silently. He crossed the room and laid his hand on the table. Then he went into the bedroom and sat down at his desk.

"Your papers are in the suitcase by the door," said Ana, leaning against the doorframe. He stood again and went over to the balcony, before turning to face her across the bed.

"Every day I thought of these walls," he said, "and you within them."

Ana said nothing. The gaunt man with greying temples seemed a stranger to her and she didn't know how to reply to his words.

"Is there water?" he said. "I need to wash."

Ana nodded, and walked back through to the kitchen. She dragged the tin bath out from under the table. "There isn't much coal," she said, "to heat the water."

"It doesn't matter," he said. As the water slowly warmed on the stove, he stripped off his clothes. His body was dark with grime, dirt ingrained into the creases of his skin. Ana stooped to lift the clothes off the floor, but he stopped her. "Don't touch them, Ana," he said. "They're filthy. I'll burn them in the stove later."

She lifted them anyway, putting them into the stove and shutting the heavy iron door. When the water had warmed he carried it over to the bath and poured it in. There was barely enough for two inches of water, but he sat down in it all the same and began to scrub at his skin with an intensity that was almost ferocious. The dirt sloughed off him in layers, his skin reddened from the violent treatment. Ana went through to the bedroom and took from

the press a fresh shirt and trousers, placing them on a chair when she returned to the kitchen. She was suddenly very tired.

As Frasco pulled on his clothes she noticed layers of bruises all over his body, bright against his skin now that it was clean, the freshness of reds and purples and blues over the faded yellows and greys and greens. There was a dark scab on his shoulder with an angry circle of red around it.

“Is there anything to eat?” he said, pulling his shirt over his head quickly.

Ana pointed at the basket. He took the bath out to the balcony and then returned, placing the basket on the table, pulling out the food inside.

“Ana, why are you so thin,” he said, “with food like this in the house? Madonna, seems like you eat better now during wartime than we ever did before! Artichoke hearts and pate!”

Ana tried to smile at his joking tone, but couldn’t. “Isabella brought it for me yesterday,” she said. “I’m going to lie down. I’m tired.”

“Wait,” he said, spreading the pate thickly on the bread, “eat a little of this first.”

He crossed the room and knelt down by the chair where Ana sat, holding it out to her. She turned her face away. “I’m not hungry,” she said. “I’ll eat later.”

“Please Ana. I feel like I’ve come back to find a ghost. Please eat, or you’ll fade away to nothing.”

Ana took the bread in her hand and took a small bite. The food seemed to grow as she chewed, filling her mouth with a pasty dryness, tasting of nothing. Making an effort, she swallowed, and then put the rest back on the plate. “I don’t want it,” she said.

Frasco shrugged his shoulders, bewildered, as she stood up and walked through to the bedroom. All she wanted was to sleep. She didn’t want to talk to Frasco, or to look at him, or to hear him speak. She was sure that there was a part of her, somewhere inside, that was rejoicing in his safe return, whose skin had thrilled at that first touch, whose eyes had drunk him in, whose heart had burned to see his bruises and scars. But Ana couldn’t find that part of herself, no matter how she tried, and she lay awake, staring up at the ceiling.

After a while Frasco came through to the room. He lay down on the bed, on his side, facing her.

“Ana,” he said. “Won’t you talk to me?”

She turned her head and looked into his eyes, dark with exhaustion underneath, freshly lined at the corners. How often, during their courtship, her heartbeat had speeded in her chest on meeting his eyes. How often during their marriage, her body had swelled with

warmth. He sighed deeply and put out his hand, running it down her cheek and neck, over her shoulder, down along her ribs and letting it rest on the sharp jut of her hipbone. She felt the pressure of his hand but the warmth of his skin was lost to her.

“You know, every night at the front, and every night in the prison, I imagined you there, your head on my chest, your hand over my heart, the warmth of your body against mine, the way we used to sleep. I imagined that every time I lay down to sleep.” His voice was full of sadness. Ana couldn’t think of a reply, so she closed her eyes and waited. “Will you lie like that with me now, Ana?” he said.

She nodded, and he lifted her limbs and arranged them over him in the position they had shared their sleep in, so many nights, often waking in the mornings to find themselves in the same arrangement, not having moved an inch in the hours of the night. His left arm reached across his body, over her right hand, his hand cupped around her face. She lay within the space between his body and his right arm, which was curled around her, his hand at her elbow. As he settled her against his bruised side he winced, and she moved away slightly, but he pulled her closer, lifting her hand and putting it on his chest, resting his cheek against the top of her head. Ana closed her eyes and wished for sleep, but it didn’t come. Frasco’s breathing slowly deepened as the sky grew dark.

Ana lay awake throughout the night. She was exhausted. She tried to control her breathing to match Frasco’s, but it kept slipping, becoming slow and heavy, or else coming in ragged gasps. The same surreality that twisted the edges of her mind in the theatre crept over her now. She couldn’t quite believe that Frasco was in the bed, lying against her the way she’d imagined night after night, for two years. Then he stirred, mumbling something that she didn’t catch. His skin had a sheen of sweat upon it and he twisted violently, shouting out, throwing her off his body and across the bed. When she looked at him his eyes were open, and he reached out an arm to her. “Sorry, querida mia,” he said, his voice hoarse. “A nightmare.” He seemed like a stranger. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

In the morning Ana woke up to an empty bed. For a fraction of a second it was as if the last few weeks hadn’t happened, and then she turned her head. Frasco’s scent on the pillowcase filled her nostrils, and she saw him sitting on the balcony outside, through the thin organza of the curtains, smoking a cigarette. His hand was shaking. Turning her head, she looked around her at the familiar walls of her bedroom. Today would be the last day she would spend here, in their apartment, in her own city. After tonight she would be gone, perhaps forever. She wondered dully how she should spend the day, what rites émigrés completed on their final

day within the walls of their own cities. She couldn't bear to go back to the streets of her childhood. She didn't want to go to the brothel, knowing that Antonia's absence would permeate the entire house. She thought of going to the river and then decided against it, shivering. The black water would call out to her, a siren song which she might not be able to resist. The theatre, to step inside the door one last time, where she'd been so happy...she couldn't do it. No, she would stay here with Frasco. But it wasn't the same for him. They were going to Barcelona, to the streets he had known as a boy. At least he'd be safe there, and Ana with him. Her gaze returned to the figure out on the balcony. She had achieved that, at least. Her husband was sitting a couple of metres from her, and he was safe. She had held his life in her hands, and saved it, though he didn't know it and she'd never tell him. She didn't want to remember her sacrifices, and yet she couldn't bear to forget.

Ana turned her head on the pillow, looking at the wall. Her eyelids were heavy, and she guessed that she'd only slept for an hour, maybe two. The sky had been light before she'd fallen heavily into unconsciousness. She was cold, despite the blankets over her, a small tight kernel of ice deep inside her that nothing could melt. Her last day in her city. At sunset she'd be down at the port, stepping on the boat. She turned over, pulled the covers up to her chin and closed her eyes.

When she woke up for the second time Frasco was sitting at his desk in the corner, his hands on the empty surface.

"You're awake," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you want something to eat?" He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, putting his hand on her leg, encircling her ankle with his thumb and forefinger.

Ana shook her head.

He released her ankle and stroked the front of her foot, his finger tracing the tendons that stood out from the skin. "The war's been hard on you."

She looked away from him, out the window.

"I'm the one who was in prison, but you're in worse shape than me."

Ana pulled her legs away, up to her chest, and put her arms around her knees. "What time is it?" She knew that Frasco was looking at her but she kept looking out the window.

"Afternoon. Maybe three o'clock?"

"We need to be at the port by sunset."

“How – how are we to pay the boat man?” He was looking down, not meeting her eyes.

“I have jewellery – no, money. Isabella came, she gave me money.” Ana put her hand to her neck, where Elisa’s locket still hung. “We can use the money.”

Frasco frowned. “It doesn’t sit well with me to use your sister’s money.”

“She won’t take it back now.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Is there anything you want to do before we go? Visit your sisters?”

Ana shook her head slowly, from side to side.

“What about the theatre? Don’t you want to see it one last time? I know how much you loved it there.”

Ana closed her eyes. “No, I don’t want to go to the theatre.”

“Or the river? We could go for a walk down by the river, just like we used to.”

“No, Frasco. I don’t want to go anywhere.”

There was a pause. Ana opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Ana, what’s wrong with you? Are you angry with me for leaving?”

He was looking at her, his expression hurt and bewildered.

“I just...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“Ana...” He moved closer to her and put his arms around her, resting his cheek on the top of her head, kissing her hair, where the part was. “I thought about you every day, in every moment, when I was happy, when I was angry, when I was frightened. I wrote letters to you in my head before I went to sleep at night. You’re my heart, Ana. I know you’ve come through a terrible time, but it’s over now. We’re getting out of here tonight, we’ll be safe, and we’ll be together.” He pulled away from her, holding the tops of her arms, and looked into her eyes. “Please, Ana.”

She turned away and lay down again, pulling her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. “Just leave me alone, Frasco.”

He stood up and walked out on to the balcony. Ana closed her eyes again.

A couple of hours later Frasco woke her up. “The sun’ll be down in an hour,” he said. “We should get ready to leave.”

Ana nodded and swung her legs over the side of the bed, but when she tried to stand, her head swam, and she sat down again suddenly.

“You need to eat something,” Frasco said. It took an effort for her to force the food down, but gradually she started feeling stronger.

“There’s not much time left,” Frasco said. “Where are your clothes for the journey?”

Ana pointed at the chair in the corner, and he passed them to her as she pulled her nightdress over her head.

“That’s a pretty locket,” he said, pointing at Elisa’s necklace. “Where did that come from?”

“It belongs to Elisa,” Ana said, her words slow.

“Did she make you a present of it?”

Ana didn’t reply.

“She’ll miss you when we go, you know. She loves you like a daughter. She used to tell me every day, Look after that wife of yours, nino, you won’t find a better one.”

Ana swallowed. “She’s dead.”

“Dead?” He ran his hand down over his face. “When did she die? How?”

“It was...a week or so ago. She was – she was ill, something in the chest. I – she wouldn’t let me go for a doctor.”

Frasco helped her into her dress as she spoke. “Well it would have been a great comfort to her, to have you there at the end.”

Ana nodded but didn’t speak, and he glanced up at her as he knelt down, sliding her feet into her boots and lacing them up. He helped her to her feet and turned her around, buttoning up the back of her dress. Even when buttoned, it hung off her frame.

“It’s a little big these days,” he said, pulling her hair out from underneath the collar. He held it in his hand for a moment and kissed it, before letting it fall down her back. The fur coat was still sitting over the back of the chair, and Ana lifted it and pulled it on.

“Where did that come from? Jewellery, furs...if I didn’t know better I’d say you had some rich lover while I was away!”

Ana tried to summon a smile for him, but she couldn’t. “It’s from the theatre. Pura wore it in that production of El Olivo, don’t you remember?”

“Oh yes. Well it’ll keep you warm out on the water anyway.”

“I put all your papers in the suitcase.”

“I know,” he said, resting his hand on her cheek. “You told me already.” He looked around the room for a long minute. “We were happy here, weren’t we?”

Ana followed the direction of his gaze. She knew all the things that had happened in this room, the music, the fights, the loving, but she couldn’t remember the sound of the guitar, nor the touch of Frasco’s skin, nor the person she had been in those far-off, happy days.

Frasco walked through to the other room and picked up the suitcase, holding out his arm. "We should go, Ana," he said, his voice heavy and sad.

Together they stepped out on to the landing. Ana turned and locked the door behind her and dropped the key into her pocket. Leaning on Frasco's arm, she went down the stairs and out on to the street. The sun was low in the sky, the shadows long. They walked quickly, not speaking, nor looking at one another. In a few minutes they reached the river and in another they crossed the bridge, the water golden underneath them. They passed the street that led to the theatre and Frasco looked down it, but he didn't say anything. They walked quickly through the artists' quarter, their footsteps ringing out through the empty streets, Frasco shaking his head.

"It's all changed," he said, almost to himself. "It's like a different place, a ghost of what it was before."

And then they were at the port. Ana could see the dark figure of Salvador, silhouetted at the end of the pier, against the evening sun reflected on the water.

"Is that him?"

She nodded and they made their way along the pier. The shadowed water glinted up from the cracks between the wooden boards. When they reached the boatman Frasco took the envelope of money out of his pocket.

"I'm Frasco Barea, Ana's husband. I understand you're taking us to Valencia?"

The boatman nodded. "First, you pay," he said, his voice gruff. Frasco held out the envelope of money. He took it and checked inside. "I was to be paid in gold," he said, his eyes darting towards Ana. "Jewellery. A necklace, a couple of rings, a brooch as well maybe."

Frasco glanced at Ana. "Won't the money do?"

He shrugged. "Gold's better, but it'll do, I suppose." He looked Frasco up and down. "You'll have to help with the rowing you know. It's a long way to Valencia."

Frasco nodded and he gestured towards the boat. Putting one hand on the pier, Frasco jumped down and put the suitcase on the floor of the boat before turning back towards Ana. The boat rocked slightly and he stood with his legs spread apart. "Come, Ana," he said. Ana leant forward and he put his hands on her waist and lifted her down into the boat. The boatman untied the rope and tossed it in, before jumping down lightly himself. He started to row, the oars entering the water with a soft splash. Ana was shivering and Frasco put his arm around her shoulders. When she looked at him he was staring back at the city they were leaving, but Ana bowed her head and closed her eyes.

Barcelona, October 1938

Michael settled himself into his seat as the train pulled out of the station. It was more than a month since that day in the Ebro valley when Peter had told them they were going home. The first few days in the hospital had passed in a blur of pain but it had distracted him from his thoughts. And then Pura had given him the notebook. He'd written steadily for the next two weeks, sitting at a table in the dining room, filling the notebook and moving on to sheets of paper, wearing the pencil down to a stub, the next one too. The notebook was in the breast pockets of his shirt, the extra sheets folded inside, the edges already worn and curling from wear. He had no idea what to do with what he'd written. Maybe he'd read it back one day, but not any time soon. Fields slid by the window, the sky heavy with clouds, and he rested his head against the glass, closing his eyes. He didn't want to go home. He didn't know how he'd explain his time in Spain, couldn't bear the thought of a full house and expectant faces, waiting to hear his stories.

He couldn't remember too much of what had happened when they'd found him, the doctor had said he'd lost a lot of blood. But how it felt, warm blood running down his arm, dripping on to ground already soaked with Johnny's blood... They'd been together since the very start, since that day in Gordon Street when he'd met Peter and Johnny at the station and they'd gone inside for the London train.

But Michael was going home alone. He didn't know where Johnny was buried, or even if he'd been buried. He'd never see his grave, never be back in Spain. The Republic had lost the war, they just hadn't stopped fighting yet. He looked around the carriage. The train was full of men from the hospital, all different nationalities, all on their way to Barcelona. Most of them were sitting in silence, a few talking in low voices. It was very different from the train out of Paris, the band at the station, the singing on board, the men moving up and down the carriages, a chorus of introductions and rude jokes and different languages spoken, different nationalities all united against fascism, before they knew that they were going to fight for a cause that was lost before they'd even arrived, going to watch their friends die for nothing. And now they were on the journey back, returning to Barcelona for a farewell parade of the International Brigades before being sent back over the border. Michael didn't want a parade. He didn't need anything to remind him of the men who'd never be marching with him again.



“There’s a farewell parade for the International Brigades this afternoon,” Frasco said, putting a cup of what passed for coffee down in front of her.

Ana didn’t reply, pulling the shawl tighter round her shoulders. She’d been cold since they’d left home, since the boat ride which seemed to last for hours, through the dark choppy water. The fur coat hadn’t seemed to help against the wind and when they arrived in Valencia she’d left it in the room, on Frasco’s advice. “We don’t want to draw any more attention to ourselves than is necessary, after all,” he’d said, and she knew he was right. It didn’t matter to her anyway, just one more thing she was leaving behind. They’d managed to make their way to Barcelona through a succession of trains, and when they’d arrived they’d gone straight to Frasco’s sister’s house. His mother had died in the second year of the war, and for the first time since he’d come back, for the first time ever, Ana saw him cry. He sat down at the table and put his head in his hands and wept, his shoulders shaking. Ana stood in the doorway, watching him, knowing that she should comfort him but not knowing how. Eventually his sister, Mira, put her arms round his shoulders, giving Ana an odd look, and later that night she’d heard them discussing her in the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with her?” That was Mira’s voice. “The children are frightened of her.”

“She’s fine,” said Frasco. He sounded defensive. “The war was hard on her, that’s all. And her mother’s not long dead, and she’s just had to leave her home, and we probably won’t be going back.”

“Well I would have thought she’d have been more sympathetic about Mama, if she knows what you’re going through.”

“I’m all right,” said Frasco. “And will you keep your voice down?”

After that their voices had quietened to a low murmur. But Mira hadn’t been friendly with her as she’d been before, and she was right, the children were frightened of her. Fernando, the youngest, hid behind Mira’s skirt whenever they were in the same room. Mira came into the room now, throwing Ana a look, and sat down at the table with them.

“Yuck,” Mira said, taking a sip of the coffee Frasco had placed in front of her, “that’s disgusting.”

“I’d have thought you’d be used to it by now,” said Frasco, “you’ve been making coffee this bad all your life.”

Ana sipped her coffee. It was thin and bitter.

“Why are you sitting with a shawl round you?” said Mira. “It’s a beautiful day today. Not cold for October, anyway.”

Ana shrugged, taking another sip of her coffee.

“You’ve been cold since the boat, haven’t you, querida mia?” said Frasco, crossing the room and running his hand down the side of her neck and along her shoulder.

“Can she not speak for herself?” Mira’s voice was sharp and she shook her hair back over her shoulders.

“Mira.” Frasco’s tone was a warning, and Mira rolled her eyes.

It felt like they’d been on the train forever by the time they finally arrived. The carriage stank of smoke and sweat; even though it was October it was still warm. It was only slightly cooler when Michael stepped off the train. The light poured in through the vaulted glass roof of the station, reminding him of another station on another sunny day, when the light had fallen through the roof and lit up Leila’s hair. He’d thought about her, too, on the train to Barcelona, but he wouldn’t go to see her when they got to Paris. He wouldn’t know what to say. It was all over, anyway, it had been over for years. All those nights on the hard ground, picturing her face when he couldn’t sleep – it had all just been wishful thinking. She probably had someone else, but even if she didn’t, there was no place for them now.

The station was crowded and he couldn’t see the exit. They’d been given the address of a hotel to sleep at that night and the rest of the men were on their way, but Michael just wanted to walk for a while. He couldn’t be bothered making conversation, he was sick to the back teeth of politics and war. An old woman banged into his bad arm and pain shot through his shoulder but he clenched his teeth against it and said nothing. In this crowd, there was no point. After a couple of minutes he saw the exit and once he was out on the street he started walking. He didn’t know where he was going, it didn’t matter. He just wanted to walk so he didn’t have to think.

“Are you taking the children to the parade today?”

“No I’m not,” Mira said. “They’re just adventurers, strangers, and I don’t care if they’re Fascists or Marxists. They’ve had their fill of killing Spaniards like rabbits and now they’re going home. Nobody invited them to take part in our funeral.”

“I’m pretty sure Franco took all the help he could get from Hitler and Mussolini,” said Frasco, “and the Fascists would be in Barcelona as we speak if it wasn’t for the International Brigades.”

“All they did was draw it out even longer,” said Mira. “A lot more men would have come home to their families if the war had ended two years ago.”

“Well I’m going,” said Frasco.

“Did you ever fight with the Americans, Tio Frasco?” That was Luca, the older boy. Ana guessed he was about seven or eight. She’d seen him down in the courtyard, playing at soldiers with the other boys in the block.

“No, but I did meet some English men once,” said Frasco. “There was this truck with loudspeakers, the People’s wagon I think it was called, and it would drive along the front playing recordings of inspirational speeches. It was a stupid idea, because you’d only hear half a sentence and then it would have passed. We found some old records in the doctor’s house in this village and Alejandro decided to steal the truck and play the records instead. But the tyre got a puncture as we were driving, and the English soldiers helped us to change it.”

Mira stood up from the table. “I told you, Frasco,” she said, “no war stories in front of the boys.”

He shrugged and grinned. “That was a good story though.”

“Did you kill a lot of Fascists?”

“Right, that’s enough,” said Mira, shooing him out of the room in front of her. “Go and play with your brother.”

Left alone, Ana looked up to see Frasco looking at her. “You’re very quiet,” he said. There was a pause. “You’ve been very quiet since...since I got back.”

Ana bowed her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“We should go to the parade,” said Frasco, getting up from the table.

When Michael woke up the next morning it was almost like being back in the barracks in Madrigueras with the sound of men clattering up and down stairs, shouting to one another. He sat up and looked around the room. It had been dark when he’d let himself in last night, after hours of walking around the city. There was a lot of bomb damage, and he’d remembered the slogan, “Bombs on Madrid today means bombs on Glasgow tomorrow.” But they hadn’t stopped the bombers in Spain. He shook his head to clear it and got out of bed, looking around as he laced up his boots. The room might have been fancy once, but now the floor was scuffed and scratched. The walls were stained with cigarette smoke and there were empty outlines where pictures or mirrors had once hung, he guessed. The ceiling had those curly bits around the edges, and the furniture in the room would have been nice if it hadn’t been so tattered. It was the same going downstairs. The walls were lined with empty spaces, only recognisable as squares of less faded wallpaper. The carpet was worn through on the centre of the stairs, and Michael guessed that hundreds of men had walked up and down them

over the course of the war. He went into the dining room, picking up a stale roll and a cup of what passed for coffee on the way to a seat. He saw some members of the battalion and made his way over to them, nodding a hello, but he didn't speak to them, he just sat down and ate his roll.

As they walked to a street that was on the parade route, Ana dragged her feet. She didn't want to go a parade, no heart for cheering the soldiers or throwing flowers. Following Frasco as he turned corners in this unfamiliar city, she thought for a moment about her own city, and then realised that she didn't want to go home. What she wanted was to go back, to a happier time. They reached the parade route. The streets weren't too busy, only one row lining the pavements, and there was no sign of any soldiers, at least not yet. They stood and waited, and Ana leant her weight on Frasco's arm. Slowly the street filled up. At one point Frasco turned around.

"Look at the crowd behind us," he said.

Ana looked back. There were hundreds of people up and down the street now, waiting, flowers in their hands, and behind them the wide pavement was full of people, right up to the wall of the building at their backs. A ripple ran through the crowd.

"They'll be coming along shortly," Frasco said.

A couple of hours later Michael was at the starting point of the parade. As they got into formation Michael looked at the man to his left, but he didn't recognise him. There was only one man to his right, he was near the outside of the column, but he didn't recognise him either. A whistle blew and he saw the first few rows of men start to move, a movement that rippled back until his row, too, started marching. The streets were lined with people, the pavements full, women hanging out of windows to watch, throwing flowers on the ground, but Michael kept his eyes down. He didn't want the cheering of the crowd, or the speeches that he knew were coming at the end of the parade, or the flowers. He just wanted to go back to a time when everything was easier, before he thought that things could be changed or injustice challenged, before he'd seen the things that he'd seen, before he'd lost anyone he loved. He wanted to go back to ignorance, or innocence maybe, when happiness was as simple as money in your pocket on a Friday night and a girl on your arm. But more than anything, he wished that Johnny and Charlie were there, marching beside him. Charlie would have been defiant, probably, unwilling to go home with the Nationalists undefeated, but secretly longing to get back to his girl, who'd written him all those letters. Michael couldn't

remember her name, now, lost, like so much else. Johnny would have been smoking, probably, even in formation, a cigarette at the corner of his mouth as he winked at the good looking women along the street, cracking jokes as he swaggered along. But Michael was alone, and going back to a place he couldn't remember, to people who'd never be able to understand.

After a couple of minutes the first rows of marching soldiers came into sight. A cheer rose up from the crowd and they began to throw their flowers into the road. They piled up in heaps and mounds, as more flowers sailed through the air before the rows of marching men. The first few soldiers were wading through them, there were so many, they were ankle deep in them, but as row after row passed the flowers began to get trampled down into the stones.

"I think I recognise him," said Frasco, looking at the soldiers.

Ana looked up.

He narrowed his eyes, and then shook his head. "No, maybe it's not."

Ana followed his gaze through the blur of uniforms.

As they turned a corner Michael looked up. There was a woman, standing at the side of the road, near the front. There was a man standing next to her who Michael half recognised. He couldn't be sure, and it didn't seem to matter. But the woman...she wasn't cheering or smiling or crying, like the others. Her arms were folded across the front of her faded dress, her shoulders hunched as if she were cold. Her face was expressionless. She would have been pretty once but she was too thin, long black hair hanging down on either side of a face that was all hollows and angles, with large dark eyes that suddenly met Michael's.

He was walking rather than marching, a weariness in his step, slightly out of time with the others. The papers in his breast pocket were bulging out of the cloth. He was looking straight at her, a blankness in his eyes, and in that empty space Ana's whole war flashed before her. The day Frasco left, the day she met the captain, the day Elisa died, the day of her mother's funeral, the day she left her city forever. Michael saw it all again before him. He'd put it all down in the notebook that was in his breast pocket, but he'd never be rid of it. He'd never find his way home and he'd be carrying Johnny and Charlie and the rest of the war with him for his whole life. They wouldn't get back what they'd lost. Something inside them had

gone, the people they'd left behind, the time now irrevocably lost to them, the absences they would feel for the rest of their lives.

The cheering of the crowd, the soldiers' singing, seemed suddenly distant. A cloud passed over the sun and the wide boulevard filled with shadows. The crowd shifted. They lost sight of one another and bowed their heads again to see the flowers underfoot, the flowers thrown by the crowd and trampled into the cobblestones by soldiers' boots, and the smell of the crushed petals filled the air.

***What Remains and The Failure of Idealism in the Spanish Civil War***

Volumes 1 & 2

Volume 2

**Faith and doubt: The Failure of Idealism in the Spanish Civil War**

**A reader's companion to *What Remains***

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## 1. Introduction

Many of the books referred to in this essay were originally read with the intent of researching the war for *What Remains*. In the course of my research, I became fascinated by the splits among the left wing groups which had formed a Popular Front government and were engaged in fighting the Nationalists, led by General Franco. While much of this research did not directly affect the plot of *What Remains*, it changed my perception of the war, especially from the perspective of the foreign volunteers, and informed the characters' experience of the conflict overall.

This essay offers a brief summary of the main events and ideological conflicts of the civil war (a history within the context of writing the novel and the discovery of key questions and themes) for any reader unfamiliar with the general background of the war. It then goes on to examine the way that the internecine fighting between left wing groups not only jeopardised the Popular Front but also undermined the ideal for which they were fighting. The relationship between politics and religion is examined as a way of comparing and contrasting the idealism of the Republican volunteers with the religious faith of the Nationalist rebels. The ultimate disillusionment of many of the foreign volunteers and the way this is portrayed is explored through an examination of participants' accounts, both in the form of oral history and memoir. Lastly, the essay looks at some creative representations of the conflict, both contemporary and current, and their critical reception.

The massive influx of foreign volunteers to fight against Franco's forces was inspired by the concept of the Spanish Republic as a socialist democracy, a workers' state concerned with improving the lot of the working classes. This reader's companion to *What Remains* examines the process of researching the Spanish civil war, my exploration of the passionate political beliefs that inspired the volunteers, the way this faith was undermined by the divisions among the Republican factions, and how this has been represented in contemporary and current film and literature. This is an essay about truth, what happens when there are too many truths, how truth and idealism are uneasy bedfellows and how the job of the historical novelist is to choose what to believe and what story to tell.

## 2. La Pasionaria

There is a statue down by the Clyde, facing south across the river; the fibreglass figure of a woman standing on a rectangular plinth, supported by a pedestal. There is no softness in her features or figure. Her face is composed of angles and planes, her head and chest thrust forward, her fists are clenched in the air and her hair streams back over her shoulders. There is a sentence below her feet: *Better to die on your feet than to live for ever on your knees*, along with a name, Dolores Ibárruri, and the words, La Pasionaria. The monument was commissioned by the International Brigade Association of Scotland, and produced by the working class, Liverpool based sculptor, Arthur Dooley. It was unveiled on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1979, forty years after the end of the civil war, six years before I was born.

I first saw this statue aged eight, walking across the bridge into the city centre with my mother. I remember asking what the statue was, impressed by the defiance of her pose, the bravado of the line. Since then I have probably walked by La Pasionaria hundreds of times on my way to work, and my feelings towards the statue have gradually changed over the years.

When I was younger I regarded her with a feeling of awe and admiration. She seemed an impossibly bold and romantic figure. After the beginning of my research on the Spanish civil war, she seemed like an old friend, familiar from photographs of Dolores Ibárruri in books, speeches and the accounts of her addresses to crowds in civil war Spain. It was strangely comforting to think that an awareness of the war existed in the streets of my own city as well as in my head, a connection between that time and my time. But as my research progressed, my suspicions of the Communist party of which she was a figurehead grew. The discovery that her son had been sent to Russia for the duration of the war undermined somewhat the defiance and bravado of her slogan. I had become wary of slogan-makers, and I had read the speech in which she said:

The Trotskyists have long been transformed into the agents of fascism, into the agents of the German Gestapo... And everybody will see this when the trial begins against the P.O.U.M. leaders who were caught in their spying activity. The Trotskyists must be rooted out and destroyed like wild beasts. (Reid, 2007)

I'd read about the torture and execution of Andre Nin, the POUM leader, at the hands of the Soviet secret police in Spain; the death of Bob Smillie, a student of Glasgow University, who'd been flung into prison by the same police and had died before he was

released<sup>1</sup>; the foreign volunteers who slept rough in Barcelona to avoid being arrested while they were trying to find a way out of the country. When I passed the statue I felt uncomfortable about my earlier feelings of admiration, foolish, as if I'd been tricked.

On the steel pedestal under the monument, there is an inscription which reads: *The City of Glasgow and the British Labour movement pay tribute to the courage of those men and women who went to Spain to fight fascism 1936-1939. 2100 volunteers went from Britain. 534 were killed, 65 of whom came from Glasgow.* Seventy six years have passed since the beginning of the conflict, but I feel an affinity with those men and believe their story is still relevant and important today.

Whenever I happen to walk past the statue of La Pasionaria now, Ken Loach's comment on the Spanish civil war comes to mind:

There's been this great force that could have changed things, could have changed the world, and it's always been misled and sidetracked and obscured and obfuscated and led up a cul-de-sac. And the Spanish experience shows it very clearly; crystallises it. There have been several great opportunities in this century for the people to inherit the earth, and that was one of them.

The war is often described as 'the last great cause', and this sense of the Spanish civil war as a time of missed opportunity, of the Spanish Republic and the revolution as humanity's great experiment unrealised, pervades the subsequent creative interpretations of the conflict. Similarly the idealism that shines through in contemporary accounts shows that the participants too, at least at first, believed the world was about to change.

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<sup>1</sup> There is some controversy surrounding the death of Bob Smillie. It is believed that he died of appendicitis. While it seems that he did not die as a result of his treatment at the hands of his jailers, his death would certainly have been preventable had he been given access to medical treatment.

### 3. Researching *What Remains*

My first introduction to the Spanish civil war came at the age of fifteen, in the form of a module on my Higher History course. I remember hardly anything of what we were taught in terms of facts and figures; I was, however, left with a few vivid impressions of the war. We spent an entire lesson learning about Guernica one afternoon, but the facts of the atrocity - 1654 people killed and 889 wounded (Thomas 1961: 419) - didn't stay with me. Instead I retained the image of a single oak tree, symbolic of the rights of the Basque people, left standing amid scenes of apocalyptic destruction. The same is true for the rest of the module. My memory of those lessons is comprised of snapshots: singing Italians surrendering to their countrymen; women taking up rifles and building barricades; an army of soldier-poets, making their way to Spain from all over Europe and further to fight for freedom. This type of historical vision is discussed in the opening pages of *The Past Within Us*, Tessa Morris-Suzuki's examination of the representation of history in the mass media:

It is the snippets of vision and sound – seconds of newsreel, stark caricatured faces – that continue to frame our picture of the past even when the details of the accompanying narratives have been forgotten. (Morris-Suzuki 2005: 4)

During the MLitt course I went to a writing workshop run by the Playwrights Studio and led by Rona Munro. Part of the discussion was her process of finding something to write about. According to her, the key is to combine what you're interested in with what you know about. In the example she gave, the Tudors were an interesting subject for her and she had just been the unwilling partner in an acrimonious divorce, so her next project was a play about Catherine of Aragon. Walking home after the workshop, on the basis of half-forgotten history lessons, I decided that the novel I wanted to write would be set during the Spanish civil war.

I knew that a more robust understanding of the history was essential before beginning and so I went to the library. I typed *Spanish civil war* into the reference computers and wrote down titles, authors, reference numbers. Up in the history section I picked the books off the shelf, histories of the Spanish civil war by Antony Beevor, Paul Preston and Hugh Thomas. There were facts, figures, locations, dates, meetings, rebellions, battles, elections, party politics, influential generals and politicians. As a reader, I consumed those books with an avid curiosity, but as a writer I was left unsatisfied. I understood the broad frame of the war and its

progression but only from a distant, present day perspective. This gave me a factual outline within which to set my story, but the more I read, the more removed from me the war seemed. The scholarly language acted as a sponge, soaking up my fascination with the period, leaving me with a drier, more academic interest. When I look back now, I realise that what interested me about the war, from the start, was role of the International Brigades, and the idea that anyone would go to fight for a political belief. I was looking for the reason, the motivation for that kind of faith. I didn't find it in the history books, but I did learn about a strange episode that I had no memory of from Higher history – the May fighting in Barcelona. I read about it with horror – I had found the most destructive manifestation of political belief. I had been looking for the reasons for faith but instead I found the reasons for disillusionment.

### 3.1 The first days of war

The Popular Front government, before the uprising, was composed of politicians from a broad sweep of left wing ideologies. This loose coalition of republicans, democrats, socialist, Catalan separatists and communists united the left wing vote in the 1936 elections (the Anarchists of the CNT trade union and the FAI organisation remained outside the Popular Front, but encouraged their members to vote for the coalition) and made it possible for the Popular Front to oust the right wing government of the previous two years. However, it left them ill-equipped to tackle the uprising of army generals, backed by sections of the middle class, the landowning classes and aristocracy and supported by the Church, which took place on the night of July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1936, into the morning of July 18<sup>th</sup>.

As the rebels rose in town after town, the left wing leaders and working class organisations were clamouring for arms to defend the Republic. The government's initial reaction to the rising was one of indecision, believing it would be confined to Morocco, despite the rebels' success in Seville and throughout Andalusia. The government attempted to oppose them through constitutional means, turning to the forces of law and order – the Army and the Civil Guard – who were with the rebels. Arming the trade unions and left wing parties, the only forces capable of resisting the rising, was an irrevocable step. The rising would be crushed but the prime minister Casares feared that arming the workers would also lead to a left wing revolution. Unable to make a decision, he resigned on the night of the 18<sup>th</sup>.

A new administration was formed, composed of middle class liberals from Republican parties. The socialists, anarchists and communists put aside their differences for the moment to throw their support behind the new government, which immediately took the decision to arm the people. By the evening of 21<sup>st</sup> July, roughly a third of Spain was in the hands of the rebels, but the workers had crushed the uprising in the remaining two thirds.

### 3.2 Two Spains emerge

On either side of an uncertain front line which ran right across the country, two very different Spains emerged in the days after the rising.

Nationalist Spain took on a distinctly military character. Martial law decrees replaced laws passed by the Republic. Left wing newspapers were closed down and all political parties banned. Private travel was banned and taking part in strikes was a capital offence. All Masons, all members of Popular Front parties, all trade union members and in some places everyone who had voted for the Popular Front were arrested, and many executed. Church congregations swelled in size, as anyone not attending Mass regularly was suspected of having 'red' sympathies. Arthur Koestler describes the atmosphere in August 1936 in Vigo, a town near the Portuguese border where the rising had been successful.

He notes, during his hour's walk through the town, that it is chock-full of troops – Legionaries, Carlists, Falangists, but no Moors: that all the taxis and private cars are labelled "Requisitioned"; that all the young people wear a yellow armlet with the letter "M" – *mobilizado*; that the civilians slink timidly along by the walls, and that scarcely a single woman is to be seen out in the streets...He reads the notices posted up in the cafes: "You are requested not to talk politics," and hears people talking in hushed whispers – for there are spies everywhere... (Koestler 1937: 20)

While the impartiality of Koestler's account of Nationalist Spain is certainly compromised by his membership of the Communist party, the restrictive atmosphere is confirmed by less partisan journalists.

Sir Percival Phillips, a senior foreign correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph*, which was favourable to Franco, left Salamanca for Lisbon in disgust after a short time, complaining that the foreign press corps in Nationalist Spain was treated like 'fancy Cook's tourists dragged around by a guide, or a bunch of schoolgirls under the guidance of a mistress'...Sir Percival claimed that in all his war reporting he had never experienced such 'chilliness' from military officers, who in Spain 'dislike the press and want them banned'. Even officers to whom he had been introduced socially might

shake the correspondents hand but would then 'immediately turn their backs' in order to show their disdain. (Keene 2001: 74)

The atmosphere of fear among the civilians, described by Koestler, is brought up again and again in *Blood of Spain*, an oral history by eyewitness participants, put together in the early 1970s by Ronald Fraser.

The instinct of self-preservation. Imagine what it's like, day after day, to go out into the street, light a cigarette, walk to the café and act as though nothing is happening. For if you don't show your face you become an object of suspicion. Only by acting as though everything is perfectly normal can you show that you are above suspicion. You fear that if you hide your knowledge about someone else you will be executed; you hope that if you inform, your life will be spared. By becoming part of 'normality' the terror contributed to maintaining an appearance of normality. (Fraser 1979: 168)

However, at the time, the reports filtering out to the outside world were of a New Spain, evolving under authoritarian leadership and based on traditional values. The initial act of rebellion was the only revolutionary aspect of Nationalist Spain - its purpose was to establish a dictatorship, protect the status quo for landowners and maintain the influence of the army and the Church. The fascist trappings of the regime were little more than a useful tool for ensuring the support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Republican Spain, on the other hand, was in the midst of a left wing revolution. In the first days after the rising Madrid seemed a revolutionary city. The workers of the socialist UGT and the anarcho-syndicalist CNT had held the city against the rebels and, as a large part of the traditional governmental structure was composed of the middle and upper classes and suspected of sympathising with the rebels, it fell to the trade unions to reorganise the Republic while the workers organised themselves into militias. However, once the militiamen left for the front, the revolutionary aspect seemed to evaporate. The communists, behind the UGT, were preaching a moderate, non-revolutionary, disciplined approach to war in the hope of ensuring middle classes support for the Republic's resistance. Once the UGT was firmly in charge, Madrid appeared a city at war, not in revolution.

Outside Madrid, however, the revolution was in full swing. Over the months following the outbreak of civil war, agricultural collectives sprang up in villages all over Republican territory. In Barcelona workers' committees took over the management of industry. The kitchens of the Ritz were turned into a public canteen for those in need. Political banners and posters were everywhere and everyone dressed in 'proletarian' garb.

The exhilaration felt is famously described by George Orwell in the opening of *Homage to Catalonia*. Worth quoting at length, this description goes some way towards explaining the rush of foreign volunteers who signed up to fight for the Republic.

The aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches here and there were being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘*Senor*’ or ‘*Don*’ or even ‘*Usted*’; everyone called everyone else ‘*Comrade*’ and ‘*Thou*’ and said ‘*Salud!*’ instead of ‘*Buenos días*’. Almost my first experience was receiving a lecture from a hotel manager for trying to tip a lift-boy. There were no private motor cars, they had all been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis and much of the other transport were painted red and black. The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the remaining few advertisements look like daubs of mud. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loudspeakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night. And it was the aspect of the crowds that was the queerest thing of all. In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no ‘well-dressed’ people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I didn’t even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for. (Orwell 2000: 4)

These two Spains, one frightening and oppressive, the other jubilant and ‘free’, made a strange contrast. It seemed that after the outbreak of the civil war, depending on whether the rising had succeeded or failed in a particular town, ordinary people suddenly had to negotiate two very different types of existence.

### 3.3 European reactions to the conflict

Outside Spain, the civil war divided opinion, on a European and domestic level. From the first days of the war, Germany and Italy provided the Nationalists with arms, artillery, tanks, aeroplanes and men. France’s popular front government under Leon Blum initially supported



the Republic and agreed to sell them arms, but under pressure from Britain withdrew their support in favour of a Non Intervention pact. However the working classes in Britain and France were overwhelmingly in favour of supporting the Republic, and the Non Intervention pact, openly flouted by Germany and Italy, created a great deal of frustration and anger among the left wing movement. The Labour party in Britain, to the shock and disappointment of its supporters, did not argue for intervention, and the Communist Party, as directed by the Soviet Union, emerged as the only political party which would act to aid the legally elected government of Spain.

In the first months after the war there was a stream of foreign volunteers into Spain. As much as they were going to fight for the Republic and the socialist ideals it seemed to represent, they were also going to fight against something. Many of them were German or Italian exiles who saw the war as a chance to fight against the fascism that had taken grip in their own countries. British volunteers had a similar perspective. 'Spain was a warning of what would happen to all of us. If we let Spain go, then it would be our fate, too, to go to war.' (Arthur 2009: 81) Mosley's Fascists had been gaining support in Britain, as had O'Duffy's Blueshirts in Ireland, and the civil war was viewed as an ideological conflict, a chance to stamp out Fascism before it spread any further across Europe. 'I thought there was a danger Ireland would go Fascist, and that was one of the motivating factors in making up my mind to go to Spain. I didn't know much about Spain – but I certainly knew that my thoughts were that every bullet I fired would be against the Dublin landlords and the capitalists.' (Arthur 2009: 177) Again and again, in survivors' accounts, the same sentiments crop up. 'The Spanish could have beaten Fascism, and could have stopped Hitler and Mussolini. I know it sounds idiotic to say so – we might even have averted or avoided the Second World war.' (Arthur 2009: 244)

In the opening chapter of *Homage to Caledonia* by Daniel Gray, an examination of Scotland's contribution to the Spanish civil war, this theme again appears.

If, ran the consensus, fascism was not defeated in Spain, it would soon have to be defeated on an unknown and unparalleled scale at home instead; 'Bombs on Madrid today means bombs on London tomorrow' became a common slogan. (Gray 2008: 26)

While many of the volunteers saw themselves as defenders of democracy, there were also many, especially the more politicised volunteers, who believed they were fighting to build a

new society for workers: 'We are comrades in a great campaign, co-workers in a magnificent enterprise and a determined team of builders in the work for the Socialist Commonwealth.' (Gray 2008: 34) In *The Distant Drum: Reflections on the Spanish Civil War*, Claud Cockburn, a volunteer, describes the Republican forces as 'fighting to protect not only what they had but what they hoped for.' (Toynbee 1976: 46)

### 3.4 Militias vs Popular Army

There was an enormous swell of cooperation between the various left wing groups in the first days of the rising, all differences being put aside in order to defend the Republic from the Nationalists. However as the Republic settled down to fight what was to be a protracted civil war, fundamental disagreements arose within the Republican leadership about the manner in which the war should be waged against Franco's forces. The anarchists believed that war and revolution were inseparable whereas the communists insisted the focus should be on defeating the Nationalists. This conflict of opinion distilled itself in the quarrel over the militias (a revolutionary army, the perfect tool for fighting a revolutionary war) and the Popular Army (a traditional army, more appropriate for putting the revolution to one side and concentrating upon defeating Franco.)

The communists had grown rapidly in size and influence from the first days of the war. There had been a surge of middle class Republicans who, alarmed by the anarchists' revolutionary ardour and reassured by the communist preaching of discipline and moderation, had signed up to party membership. The communists had gained control of the UGT in Madrid and Barcelona, as well as the new united Socialist party in Catalonia (the PSUC). Crucially, as the Soviet Union was the only country sending arms in any large numbers to Spain, the communists had control over the supplies of weaponry. The Soviet Union sent officers and generals over to Spain to coordinate the war and they remained in Madrid in October when the government moved to Valencia. Their levels of organisation along with their links to the Soviet Union meant that they exerted an influence disproportionate to their size and their calls for a conventional army to resist the Nationalists were eventually successful.

The traditional army was under Franco's command. No group existed to resist them and so in the first days of war the militias were formed out of necessity rather than design. The bulk of the militia forces was formed by the UGT and the CNT, though there were units

from all political parties. The POUM were a small anti-Stalinist communist party whose main support was in Barcelona. At the start of the war they had raised their own militia who were engaged in holding the Aragon front. Along with the anarchists and the left socialists, the POUM believed that the militia were the perfect tool for fighting what was in their view a revolutionary war. There was no hierarchy and all militiamen drew the same pay. The officers were elected democratically and all actions were discussed by the group. There was a conviction that the morale of such an egalitarian army would prove crucial in defeating an army of mercenaries and conscripts.

The communists disagreed. The Madrid government and politicians from centre parties were advocating a conventional army to resist the Nationalists and the communists, in accordance with Soviet directives, supported them, aware that it would be easier to gain control of a centralised command.

The way dependence of Soviet assistance was manipulated to inflate the influence of the Spanish Communist Party exacerbated the Republic's greatest weakness; the interminable and violent polemics between its various factions as to how the war should be fought. (Preston 1991: 103)

*Spain, Betrayed* is a collection of previously inaccessible documents retrieved from former Soviet state and party archives which are concerned with the Spanish civil war. Among these documents there are reports from the many Communists in Spain, sent to Moscow, as well as explicit instructions from Moscow back to party members who were supposedly serving the Republican government. In a very early missive from Moscow to Spain, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1936, the issue of the militias is raised.

It is necessary to create a people's Republican army and to attract to it all of the officers and generals who have remained loyal to the Republic. But to put in a people's worker-peasant militia in place of the army actually means to follow a different line. That is a different policy. (Radosh 2001: 12)

Almost from the beginning of the war the communists disagreed with the anarchist ideology and approach to war embodied by the militias. They did however believe in the importance of a unified front, as we see in a secret report by André Marty, a strict Stalinist and International Brigade commander, in October of 1936 to the Soviet Union:

We must carry out as energetically as possible a campaign for realising the unification of workers and all people. We must strengthen discipline and bring about unified

command... To fight with them [the anarchists] in the face of fascism – this would be the end. (Radosh 2001: 53)

A unified command would also be easier to infiltrate and eventually control. Chillingly, he goes on to add ‘after victory we will get even with them, all the more so since at that point we will have a strong army.’ (Radosh 2001: 55)

### 3.5 The ‘civil war within a civil war’

We quite well understand the source of the hatred which is felt toward our Party; but we want the fact burned in letters of gold in the mind of every worker and every peasant that those who fight against the Communist Party, however picturesque the banners behind which they hide, are enemies of our revolution and of our people. (Reid 2007)

These were the words of La Pasionaria on August 10<sup>th</sup> 1937, three months after the savage fighting in Barcelona between the communist and government forces on one hand, and the anarchist CNT and the POUM on the other. The crisis lasted for five days, from 3<sup>rd</sup> May until 8<sup>th</sup> May, and the spark that caused it was the attempt by the government, as the CNT perceived it, to gain control of the Telefónica. Within a couple of hours, all the political organisations had brought out their hidden weapons, taking over important buildings and constructing barricades. Attacks and counter-attacks were made on government buildings. Machine gun and rifle fire came from the rooftops, grenades and handmade bombs exploded in the streets. This state of warfare continued over the next five days, before a ceasefire was eventually agreed upon. The official estimate of the casualties was 400 killed and 1000 wounded. (Thomas 1961: 183)

There is debate over the intention of the government as regards the Telefónica, but there can be no doubt that the communists exploited the sudden conflict to discredit and destroy the POUM. As an anti-Stalinist left communist group who rejected the Moscow line, the POUM were perceived as worse than fascists for their refusal to join the Popular Army. ‘The transformation of the Republican government from a true Popular Front to a liberal façade for the Russian-controlled faction of the Spanish communist party’ (Bolloten 1968: 4) is nowhere more apparent than in the aftermath of the May days in Barcelona. The communist ministers in the Popular Front government exerted pressure on Largo Callabero, the prime minister, to outlaw the POUM and arrest its members. With the Republic

dependent on the Russian supply of arms it would have been politic for Callabero to go along with the communists, but he refused and was promptly replaced with Juan Negrin who proved more amenable to communist demands. Within three weeks the POUM's newspaper, La Batalla, was closed down. The party was declared illegal on the 16<sup>th</sup> June and its headquarters in Barcelona turned into a prison for 'Trotskyists' and 'social fascists' by the communists. The members of the POUM were hunted down, arrested and imprisoned by the NKVD-controlled secret police. Once in prison they were subject to torture and execution. This was all overlooked by the government who, under communist pressure, was prepared to sacrifice the POUM if it meant ensuring a continuing supply of Russian arms. The worker's Republic, as a result of this Faustian pact, was proving itself to be as totalitarian and as ruthless when it came to wiping out internal critics and opponents as the Fascist government they were battling against.

After the fighting – more particularly after the slanging match in the newspapers – it was difficult to think about this war in quite the same naively idealistic manner as before. I suppose there is no one who spent more than a few weeks in Spain without being in some degree disillusioned. (Orwell 2000: 103)

When I read about the events of May 1937 and the ruthless suppression of the POUM afterwards, it filled me with horror. I had a romantic, idealised vision of the Spanish civil war but these events undermined everything I had thought about the Republican forces. I began reading veterans' accounts, memoirs and oral histories of the Spanish civil war in order to understand the effect these events would have had on those who had supposedly signed up to fight for liberty and against fascism. My interest before had been in the idealism and faith the volunteers would have needed in order to sign up for a war in a country which most of them had never been to. After reading about the fighting behind the lines in Barcelona, however, I became curious as to how this would affect the faith of the men who had signed up to supposedly fight for liberty. The actions of the Communist Party seemed totalitarian and repressive in the extreme – everything that these men were fighting against. If I had become disillusioned merely through reading about it, I could only imagine the effect it would have on the participants. I became interested in the idea of disillusion, and looked for evidence of it in the accounts of the men and women who had been involved in the war.

#### 4. Crusaders and the God that failed: politics and religion in Spain

In the beginning, it was possible to describe the struggle simply as one between democracy and fascism, between progress and reaction, between the past and the future. But now it has broken through these bounds and become transformed into a holy war, into a national war, into a defensive war of the people who feel that they have been betrayed and that their deepest sentiments have been wounded. (Bolloten 1961: 103)

This excerpt is from the August 18<sup>th</sup> edition of *Mundo Obrero*, 1936, and shows how the language used by the left wing to describe the conflict was changing, couching political beliefs in terms usually associated with religion. The Nationalists had described the conflict in this way from the beginning, portraying themselves as the defenders of religion:

We are fighting for God, for our land and for our dead...It has always been Spain's providential and historic mission to save the civilised world from all dangers: expelling moors, stopping turks, baptising Indians...Now new turks, red and cruel asiatics, are again threatening Europe. But Spain, today as yesterday, opposes them, saves and civilisation. Because this is a holy war, a crusade of civilisation... (Fraser 1979: 154)

This characterisation was of course reinforced by the violence against clergy and the church-burnings carried out in Republican territory. The conflict was framed as a crusade, and priests within Spain exhorted their congregations to enlist in the Nationalist forces and gave the armed struggle their full support: The Bishop of Cartenga preached 'Blessed by the cannons if the Gospel flowers in the breaches they blow open.' (Arthur 2009: 177) and this was a common sentiment. While there can be little doubt that the Nationalists cynically exploited their self appointed role as defenders of the faith, many of their soldiers truly believed that they were fighting a holy crusade. 'The Carlists had risen to defend religion; there would have been no rising if the republic had not persecuted religion...religion was the crux of the matter; the war in Navarre was a crusade.' (Fraser 1979: 71) Even after the fighting had begun to take its toll, this kind of language was still used:

The evidence of war was soon visible in the streets of Pamplona, as of every other city, which filled with war-wounded: men without legs, arms, blind...It was horrible, and yet mothers didn't often cry at the deaths of their sons – the war was a Crusade; their sons had gone to Heaven and that was their consolation. '*Chica*, how fortunate you are, you already have a son in heaven' was a remark one often heard... (Fraser 1979: 311)

Undoubtedly the burning of churches and the killing of priests was sacrilegious and horrifying for people with such deep and fervent Catholic faith. Inside the Republican zone

the church-burnings were sometimes interpreted as an expression not against faith per se but against the power and corruption of the Church. This was obvious even to outsiders – Jason Gurney, a member of the International Brigades, remarks upon it in his memoir, *Crusade in Spain*:

A great many people abandon the Church of their fathers but few of them feel any violence against it...In talking to village people in many places, the principal charge made against the clergy was of practising hypocrisy in many forms...the Church appeared to be totally identified with every kind of suffering and oppression. It had become the scapegoat for every sin of omission or commission by the ruling caste. (Gurney 1974: 61)

The image of the burned down churches generates the question of what we achieve when we burn down religious spaces, close down cultural spaces, deny social spaces. Are we physically denying the ideas of the past? Do these actions function as a refusal of tradition? Maurici Serrahima, a lawyer and a member of *Unio Democràtica*, a small Catalan Christian democratic party, explains.

I always maintained that, deep down, these burnings were an act of faith. That's to say, an act of protest because the church was not, in the people's eyes, what it should be. The disappointment of someone who believes and loves and is betrayed. It springs from the idea that the church should be on the side of the poor – and isn't. (Fraser 1979: 153)

This view was shared by Father Alejandro Martinez, a Madrid priest who was arrested at beginning of the conflict and imprisoned throughout. He suggested that the working classes had turned on the clergy not because of what they had done, but what they had failed to do: 'Ask yourself if that is not why we're all here: *for not having done anything*. If we had done what we ought to have done many years ago, perhaps we wouldn't be where we are now...' (Fraser 1979: 421)

Even some of the priests on the side of the Nationalists viewed their self appointed role as defenders of the faith with some cynicism.

From the start the capitalists were on Franco's side. Religion doesn't reject capitalists; but when it is they who rush to the defence of religion, then all I can say is that Jesus Christ knew what to make of it...To maintain that defence of religion was the cause of the war is an untruth. (Fraser 1979: 417)

Often the initial support for the rising among the clergy in Nationalist territory was undermined by the scale of repression to which they were witness:

The reason was the assassinations. They were totally unjustifiable. Even worse, they were being ordered and condoned, if not actually carried out, by people who declared the uprising a crusade, who came out wearing religious insignia, scapularies and *détentes*. On the other side it may have been worse, but there the assassinations weren't being carried out in the name of religion. (Fraser 1979: 417)

However, the disquiet felt by many priests was not vocalised, and officially the Church openly supported the rising. Outside Spain, where these contradictions in the behaviour of the Nationalists were not apparent, the language of crusades issued freely from pulpits in Britain and Ireland and undoubtedly had an effect. The vast majority of the Catholic working class, who otherwise might have supported the Republic, instead sympathised with the Nationalists. Religion was given as the main reason for enlistment among the Irish Brigade, a group of 670 Irishmen who volunteered to fight for Nationalist Spain (Keene 2001:119). A history of that group is in fact titled *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939: crusades in conflict*.

The use of this imagery of crusaders was not confined to the Nationalists. The left wing also characterised their cause as a crusade, and during my research I came to understand their fervent political ideals as another kind of faith. Inside Spain, anarchism, communism, trade unionism, socialism, were replacements for a Church that had proven itself to be corrupt, and the defence of the Republic provided a new myth.

Then, for the first time on earth, from every land, men who lived near by and men who lived thousands of miles away, men from countries where it's hot and men from countries where it freezes – all who were brave and unhappy shouldered their guns and started marching, marching, marching...

And they understood in their hearts that Our Lord was living there, among the poor and the oppressed ones of the earth. And so, from the ends of the world, they marched in, all who knew poverty well enough to die fighting against it; some had guns, and those who hadn't guns had their hands anyhow, and one after the other they came and lay down on the soil of Spain...And when the slaughtering had gone too far and the last company of the poor had set out on the march...a new Star rose above them. (Malraux 1979: 180)

However, the passionate political faith that characterised the supporters of the Republic made the conflicts among the left wing as bitter as any religious differences, undermining any



notion of fraternity or a common cause, and taking its toll on the idealism of the foreign volunteers. A high percentage of the men who went to Spain were Communist party members. However, there were also many men of different political persuasions, and some who were not particularly political but merely anti-fascist. There were prisons, camps and labour battalions for those who deserted, refused to obey orders or challenged the command. Alec Marcovitch, a Glaswegian communist who challenged the party line, ended up in a correction camp in Spain and described the other inmates as ‘all men of integrity, all men of profound political conscience, all men with backgrounds in the revolutionary movement.’ (Hopkins 1998: 262) For many of the volunteers the Communists’ increasingly tight control of the International Brigades was not only unwarranted, it was also exactly the type of totalitarianism that they had supposedly come to fight against.

#### 4.1 Veterans’ accounts

The first book I read was *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, a collection of interviews with veterans of the conflict which relate their personal experiences in Spain. Recorded in the late 70s and early 80s, each interview followed the same basic framework of questions on the following subjects: reasons for volunteering; their journey to Spain; their training, uniform, equipment, diet; the other volunteers they met in Spain; the Nationalist forces they were fighting against; battles or campaigns in which they were involved; wounds and deaths; bombing; the Spanish population; their return home and their involvement in the second world war; retrospective views of their experiences in Spain and how they were affected by it.

These recollections were electrifying to read after the history books upon which my research had previously been focused. The war came alive for me, and among the veterans’ memories I found details I would never have known about otherwise, which proved invaluable in the writing of Michael’s narrative in *What Remains*. After my research on the May days in Barcelona, however, I was puzzled to find no mention of it at all in several of the accounts. In a few of the accounts it is alluded to in opaque terms and throwaway comments. Tom Clarke, who was made a political commissar during the war, mentions the May days in the briefest of terms – ‘the POUM caused a lot of trouble in Barcelona.’ (MacDougall 1986: 64) In John Londragon’s account, Barcelona is again briefly mentioned but the details are wrong: ‘There actually was an incident that took place in Barcelona, in

which the Anarchist headquarters had to be raided by the Government troops to bring better order to the province.’ (MacDougall 1986: 178)

Only two of the veterans go into the situation in any detail; Hugh Sloan and Tom Murray. Both were members of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In Hugh Sloan’s account, he describes the POUM as:

...an ultra-revolutionary group that had broken away from the Spanish Communist Party, mouthing ultra-revolutionary slogans and causing obstructions to the unification processes that were needed to fight the war. We knew it as a Trotskyist-type party that was open to any kind of provocateur to enter and create situations of difficulty for the Spanish authorities. (MacDougall 1986: 198)

Tom Murray volunteered at the beginning of 1937 but was considered too valuable to the party to be sent to Spain. He joined the International Brigades early in 1938 and was made a political commissar. Again, in his account, the blame for the events in Barcelona is placed squarely on the POUM:

The terrible crime of the POUM in my view was that they tried to foster the idea that this was a revolutionary war. It wasn’t a revolutionary war. It never had any signs of a revolutionary war...I think it was a great tragedy that at a certain period in the struggle there was fighting behind the lines, instigated in my view by those who believed that it was a revolutionary struggle. And this has got to be clearly understood: it wasn’t a revolutionary struggle. (MacDougall 1986: 325)

It seems incredible that of the twenty veterans, only five veterans mention the May fighting, and of that five, four lay the blame for events on the POUM, when, as seen above, the violence was sparked by the actions of the government and the POUM were only one faction of the forces that opposed the government. However, the high number of veterans who were either members of the Communist Party or the Young Communist League at some point – seventeen out of twenty – must be taken into account. One veteran, Eddie Brown, was a member of the Communist Party before and during his time in Spain. Before he joined the Communist Party, however, he was a member of the Independent Labour Party, the party loosely affiliated with the POUM. He is a little more circumspect in his description of the events in Barcelona:

We went through Barcelona very quietly because of the fact that there were disturbances there. Well, they reckoned that it was the POUM...And what had taken place I really don’t know...We werenae told anything by those in charge of us what

was going on in Barcelona. It was only afterwards that ye actually began to see the facts and know the facts. After we had arrived in Albacete and places of that description you knew then that there had been something going on. And it came to you in the news always how it leaks out. (MacDougall 1986: 109)

This comment hints at an awareness, among at least some of the International Brigade, of the evasions and omissions by those in charge.

In *The Distant Drum: Reflections on the Spanish Civil War*, a collection of written accounts of the war edited by Philip Toynbee, an ex-Communist who visited Spain during the civil war, there is much more discussion of the infighting among the Republicans and the role played by the Communist Party in Spain. Toynbee's own reflection on the war consists of reproducing passages from the diary he kept at the time and then evaluating these extracts in light of his subsequent rejection of the Communist Party and its actions. This must be taken into account when looking at his choice of contributors, whose accounts are far more critical of the Communist Party than those of the contributors to *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*. J.R. Jump, who fought in the International Brigades, describes the scene when the execution of two soldiers is announced to the men.

They had been tried by court martial for cowardice, desertion and Trotskyism and sentenced to death. The sentence had been carried out the next day...All the men were listening intently, but their faces were expressionless. When they were finally dismissed they did not walk away immediately but stood there, still staring, as though they could not believe what they had heard...We had heard the word "Trotskyist" many times. It was synonymous with 'defeatist' or 'fascist'. A Trotskyist was one who claimed to be antifascist but, because he did not accept the current political line of the Republican government, was in fact said to be helping Franco by destroying the unity of the Republicans. (Toynbee 1976: 112)

Jump's distrust of this dogmatic language is clear in this excerpt, as is the shock and dismay of the other International Brigadiers. Another contributor, T.A.R. Hyndman, details his own treatment at the hands of the Communists:

I knew nothing, except that I was becoming almost paranoid concerning the Communist party...In Valencia we were arrested...It was a steady progress through jails, camps, then more jails...And the visits by commissars with their questions. Were we fascists? Were we Trotskyists?- even worse in their minds. Who did we meet in Valencia? It seems unbelievable, but don't forget that this was after May 1937 when the communists, aided by the civil guards, mopped up all their critics and separatists, fellow anti-fascists. (Toynbee 1976: 127)

Another contributor, John Bassett, described the more general cynicism that had set in among the International Brigade as the war went on:

They were tough, and very cynical and scarred by bullets, shrapnel and lanced boils. All their idealism was gone. One day, I was waiting in the queue for *comida* when a stranger came along, crying, 'I hear there's somebody just out from London!' Smiling, I gave him the clenched fist salute. He simply called me a bloody idiot, and moved on without another word. (Toynbee 1976: 134)

#### 4.2 *Crusade in Spain* by Jason Gurney

The following four accounts of the war are by Jason Gurney, a radical, George Orwell, who was a socialist, Arthur Koestler, a Communist who left the Party because of its actions in Spain and Stephen Spender, a journalist. Orwell and Gurney fought with different units on different fronts, Koestler was in Spain as a journalist. Stephen Spender was also in Spain as a journalist, and worked in Britain to raise awareness during the conflict. All had different experiences of the war, viewed from different perspectives, and yet their accounts all have one thing in common. Each account starts from a position of faith in the Republican cause, and charts their movement from idealism to disillusion as a result of their experiences in Spain.

Jason Gurney's account of his time in Spain, published in 1979, makes a claim for its fair-mindedness and neutrality in the opening pages, an apologia which makes sense in the context of the fiercely fought over history of the war.

Most personal experiences of the Spanish civil war were set down during or immediately after the event, usually by dedicated Communists or by ex-Communists who had quarrelled with the Party or become disillusioned. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that their writing was heavily coloured by a wish to make propaganda or as an apologia for their actions. A large part of this writing was a farrago of nonsense which has, nevertheless, passed into the mythology of the war as established fact...I have tried to set down my personal experience of the period as accurately and objectively as possible. Politically I am still no more than an old-fashioned radical and I am too old to have any personal axe to grind. (Gurney 1974: 13)

The opening chapters are a discussion of Gurney's political development as a young man. He had been aware of inequality as a teenager, but only when he heard a street corner speaker advocating an idealistic socialism did he see the injustice of the way society was ordered. 'I experienced all the symptoms of true conversion, in the religious sense of the word. I would give my life to this fine and noble cause of human brotherhood.' (Gurney 1974: 22) He goes on to detail his reading, moving from Christianity to eastern religions to psychology. He attempted *Das Kapital*, but found it 'incomprehensible'. Searching for a political ideology which would offer the solution, he described the Labour party as discredited in the 30s. He 'had a tremendous admiration for the energy and initiative of the Communist Party' (Gurney 1974: 23) but was not temperamentally suited to being a Party member and disliked the quasi-religious nature of their politics.

They were tremendously bureaucratic and earnest to the point of absurdity, so that any hint of levity was treated like farting in church. In addition they were always right. There were never two ways about anything. They had studied the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, which held the correct answer to any subject under the sun, and that was the end of the matter. Since they believed this as implicitly as any of the most bigoted religious sect believed in their Scripture, the Party was not for me. (Gurney 1974: 24)

However he supported their activities, and political debate and discussion became an important part of his life, so important, in fact, that he decided to sign up for Spain. The Communist Party were recruiting volunteers, and arranged his journey. Like Orwell, he was overcome upon his arrival in Barcelona.

What was exciting was the glorious feeling of optimism; the conviction that anything that was not right with society would assuredly be put right in the new world of universal equality and freedom which lay ahead. It may have lacked realism, but it was heady stuff to a young man who was by nature a romantic, and I drank deeply of it. I felt that these men really were my comrades as I had never felt amongst the Communist bureaucrats at home, and I was positively sure that I had done the right thing in coming to Spain to help them in their struggle. (Gurney 1974: 49)

However, this new found identification with the Communist cause was not to last for long. Gurney felt his first stirrings of unease when he arrived at Albacete. His group were given a long speech by André Marty, described by Gurney as a 'sinister and a ludicrous figure...he was quite literally mad at this time.' (Gurney 1974: 54) As one of the most prominent Communists in Spain and the chief political commissar of the International

Brigades, this impression would not have inspired confidence in the leadership of the Brigades. Gurney was dismayed by the absence of military knowledge on the part of the commanders and the lack of equipment and arms, and disgusted by the contrast between the privileged existence of the command staff and the squalid, disorganised billets for the troops, the dirty, inefficient cooking arrangements and the lack of any sanitation. He became close friends with Party members but found himself unable to accept their dogmatic political views which were incompatible with his own ideas of morality:

Nothing is good or bad absolutely, but only in terms of whether it is good or bad for the Revolution....To a large extent I think that this may be true, but I doubted whether the social revolution produced by this method would be one under which I would care to live; in any case I knew that I personally would never be able to convince myself of the justice of this point of view. (Gurney 1974: 74)

This was not a theoretical issue. Gurney found himself in the position of being a Marxist without being capable of becoming a Leninist, 'and this, in the Communist mind, put me perilously close to becoming a Trotskyist...this was a serious dilemma for I found that I was liable to be regarded as an enemy in my own camp.' (Gurney 1974: 74) A crushing realisation for a man who had felt himself among men who 'really were my comrades', fighting for a cause in which he passionately believed but under leadership which he distrusted and which regarded him as an enemy.

These feelings only grew stronger as the war got underway. Before his group saw any action, a commander was accused of being a Franco spy and executed. 'It was all rather daunting to our unfledged idealism'.(Gurney 1974: 82) These doubts persisted with each badly planned battle, needless loss of life, unkept promise, and chaotic communication. The resulting search for scapegoats and their executions as enemy agents further encouraged his growing disillusion and, according to him, caused a lot of fear and suspicion within the British Battalion. The May fighting was the nail in the coffin.

It was at this time of general demoralisation at the Front that we got news of the POUM revolt in Barcelona. It was impossible then to discover the truth about these events, but they served to heighten the feeling that the Communists were in control of the situation...The official Party now produced a mass of palpably absurd propaganda...There were the wildest rumours, spread officially and unofficially...There was no source of information that could be trusted and everyone became uneasy. (Gurney 1974: 143)

Stationed on the Jarama front, Gurney became increasingly demoralised: 'The nobility of the cause for which I had come to Spain was clearly a fiction.' (Gurney 1974: 152) The totalitarian and repressive actions of the Communist controlled Brigade staff were the cause: 'We had reached the position where individuals suddenly disappeared from circulation and it was unwise to ask about their whereabouts... What distressed me most was the continuous spate of false propaganda and lies.' (Gurney 1974: 161) On a broader scale, the Communist domination of the Republican structure had brought the revolution to a halt, and with that decision, the ordinary soldier's motivation for fighting had suddenly been removed. 'Everything that the mass of Republicans thought they were fighting for was cancelled out.' (Gurney 1974: 176)

Gurney ended up desperate to get home and when he described the experience of being wounded and invalided out, it is with an overwhelming sense of relief. There is no suggestion that he was sorry to leave Spain, describing his experience as a nightmare upon his return to London. His memoir is a chronicle of a journey from idealism to complete disillusion, and yet, in the final pages, he expresses absolutely no regrets about going to Spain;

Even at the moments of the greatest gloom and depression, I have never regretted that I took part in it... there was a clear choice for anyone who professed to be opposed to Fascism. The fact that others took advantage of our idealism in order to destroy it does not in any way invalidate the decision which we made. (Gurney 1974: 189)

#### 4.3 *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell

Orwell's account of the Spanish civil war is one of the most famous pieces of writing on the subject. The book opens with Orwell's description of Barcelona, quoted above. Originally he had come to Spain to work as a reporter, but signed up with the militia almost immediately 'because in that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.' (Orwell 2000: 2) While exhilarated by the egalitarian atmosphere in Barcelona and convinced of the importance of resisting the Nationalists, Orwell describes the same dismay felt by Gurney when confronted with the lack of weapons, the inadequate training, the patchwork uniform, the filth and chaos of the barracks. He is also struck by the lack of discipline among the militias;

Discipline did not exist; if a man disliked an order he would step out of ranks and argue fiercely with the officer...he [the officer] insisted on complete social equality between all ranks...I doubt whether it made his job any easier. Meanwhile the raw recruits were getting no military training that could be of the slightest use to them. (Orwell 2000: 8)

This was one of the key differences of opinion between the Communists and the other left wing parties; as discussed earlier, the debate of militias vs traditional army was one of the central issues of the war. In Orwell's discussion of the militia system he freely admits that 'at the beginning the apparent chaos, the general lack of training, the fact that you often had to argue for five minutes before you could get an order obeyed, appalled and infuriated me.' (Orwell 2000: 30) Upon reflection, however, he argues that the militia idea of revolutionary discipline – ensuring the men have the political consciousness to see why an order must be obeyed – was in fact surprisingly effective. He concedes that it is time consuming, 'but it also takes time to drill a man into an automaton on the barrack-square.' (Orwell 2000: 29) The inference is clear. Orwell defends the militia-system as the reason that Franco had not been immediately successful. He makes the point that the militia held the line while the Popular Army was training in the rear, and argues that the lack of discipline and training were not a result of the militia system but of the mere fact that the men who had formed militias to defend the Republic were raw, undisciplined troops and would have been so no matter what the military situation, militia or traditional army.

Orwell's frustration on the Aragon front came more from the total lack of equipment. He details not only the shortage of weaponry but also the bad quality of the weapons they did have – antiquated rifles which were more dangerous to the person firing than their target, and mismatched ammunition which was always in short supply and dangerous bombs, said to be 'impartial – they killed the man they were thrown at and the man who threw them.' (Orwell 2000: 36)

In addition to the faulty weaponry, there was also a lack of other equipment. 'We had no maps or charts...We had no range-finders, no telescopes, no periscopes, no field-glasses...no flares or Very lights, no wire-cutters, no armourers' tools... no lanterns or electric torches...' (Orwell 2000: 37)

Orwell was at the front for almost four months in these conditions. The objective of that front at that time was to take Huesca, a small town just within the Fascist lines, and although there had been a couple of attacks attempted all had been unsuccessful. He was



bored, cold, dirty and lice infested. Yet, despite the conditions and the military stalemate, it was a positive experience in the main:

One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word 'comrade' stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug. One had breathed the air of equality... In that community where no one was on the make, where there was a shortage of everything but no privilege and no boot-licking, one got, perhaps, a crude forecast of what the opening stages of Socialism might be like. And, after all, instead of disillusioning me it deeply attracted me. (Orwell 2000: 88)

In stark contrast to Jason Gurney's experience in the International Brigades, Orwell came out of the line on the Aragon front, fighting with a militia, with more faith in the cause, rather than less. He returned to Barcelona a couple of days before the outbreak of violence, sparked by the government attempt to take control of the Telefónica. Orwell was shocked upon his return to Barcelona. The revolutionary, egalitarian atmosphere which had so deeply affected him four months earlier had faded away and the old structures had reasserted themselves. The Communist controlled Popular Army was beginning to establish itself and he came across several Popular Army officers. Unlike the militia system, there was 'a definite social difference, expressed by the difference of pay and uniform.' (Orwell 2000: 94) Moreover, 'all of them had automatic pistols strapped to their belts; we, at the front, could not get pistols for love nor money' (Orwell 2000: 94). This disparity was a symptom of the Communist control over the distribution of Soviet supplied weaponry. He was also shocked by the general indifference towards the war and the propaganda against the militias, who were the ones holding the front line in many places. Orwell viewed the drop in enlistment and the apathy towards the war as:

bound up with the disappointment of the revolutionary hopes with which the war had started. The trade union members who formed themselves into militias and chased the Fascists back to Saragossa in the first few weeks of war had done so largely because they believed themselves to be fighting for working-class control; but it was becoming more and more obvious that working-class control was a lost cause. (Orwell 2000: 96)

The internecine struggle between factions of the Republican forces, specifically between the Communists and anarchists, was also making itself felt. Much of Republican territory had been under Communist control from the start of the war, but Barcelona was an anarchist centre and as such a battleground for these differing ideologies.

There was an unmistakable and horrible feeling of political rivalry and hatred...It was the antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check or prevent it – ultimately, between Anarchists and Communists. (Orwell 2000: 103)

Orwell was caught up in the May day fighting. Having enlisted in a POUM militia, he went to the POUM headquarters at the outbreak of the violence. His description of the fighting is one of confusion and uncertainty, where the foot soldiers on either side are slightly bemused by what is happening and unwilling to fight seriously against one another, as seen in the following exchange:

“We don’t want to shoot you. We’re only workers, the same as you are.”  
He made the anti-Fascist salute, which I returned. I shouted across:  
“Have you got any more beer left?”  
“No, it’s all gone.” (Orwell 2000: 119)

After the fighting had died down, Orwell realised that it was to be used as an excuse for the government to increase its control of Barcelona and the Communists to ruthlessly suppress the POUM. As the smallest party it was easy to make it the scapegoat, and as an anti-Stalinist party it was a target for the Soviet-controlled Communists. Although the POUM itself wasn’t outlawed until a month or so after the fighting, the propaganda started immediately.

The POUM was declared to be a disguised Fascist organisation, and a cartoon representing the POUM as a figure slipping off a mask marked with the hammer and sickle and revealing a hideous, maniacal face marked with the swastika, was being circulated all over town. (Orwell 2000: 2)

Orwell returned to the front three days after the Barcelona fighting ended, but without the same heart: ‘I think few experiences could be more sickening, more disillusioning or, finally, more nerve-wracking than those evil days of street warfare.’ (Orwell 2000: 116) A mere ten days after his arrival at the front, he was wounded – shot through the neck. After spending some time at the hospital in Tarragona, he returned to Barcelona where his wife was staying. There is again a long description of Barcelona; the atmosphere, the people in the streets, the public mood. It is in marked contrast to the opening description of Barcelona. Worse, not only had the revolutionary ardour disappeared from the city, it had been replaced by something much more sinister.

It is not easy to convey the nightmare atmosphere of that time – the peculiar uneasiness produced by rumours that were always changing, by censored newspapers and the constant presence of armed men. It is not easy to convey it because, at the moment, the thing essential to such an atmosphere does not exist in England. In England political intolerance is not yet taken for granted...the notion of ‘liquidating’ or ‘eliminating’ anyone who happens to disagree with you does not yet seem natural. It seemed only too natural in Barcelona. The ‘Stalinists’ were in the saddle, and therefore it was a matter of course that every ‘Trotskyist’ was in danger...It was as though some huge evil intelligence was brooding over the town. (Orwell 2000: 158)

Once the POUM was made illegal, many of the men that Orwell had fought with were arrested without charge. He himself was wanted by the police and slept rough for a few nights to avoid arrest before leaving Barcelona. However, like Jason Gurney, Orwell did not regret his experience in Spain:

This war, in which I played so ineffectual a part, had left me with memories that are mostly evil, and yet I do not wish that I had missed it. When you have had a glimpse of such a disaster as this – and however it ends the Spanish war will turn out to have been an appalling disaster, quite apart from the slaughter and physical suffering – the result is not necessarily disillusionment and cynicism. Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings. (Orwell 2000: 195)

The war without a doubt was one of the central experiences of Orwell’s life. The events in Barcelona, the spin that was put on the internecine struggle and the arrest and imprisonment of ‘traitors’ informed his two best-known works; *Animal Farm* and *1984*. ‘The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism as I understand it.’ (Orwell 1947: 4)

#### 4.4 *Spanish Testament* by Arthur Koestler

Orwell reviewed *Spanish Testament* in February, 1938, saying of it:

The prison part of the book is written mainly in the form of a diary. It is of the greatest psychological interest – probably one of the most honest and unusual documents that have been produced by the Spanish war. The earlier part is more ordinary and in places

even looks rather as though it had been “edited” for the benefit of the Left Book Club. (Davison 2000: 112)

The first part of *Spanish Testament* is an account of Koestler’s visit to Seville (in Nationalist territory) in the guise of a reporter sympathetic to the Nationalist cause. He is recognised by a German journalist who knows him to be ‘a left wing liberal’ (though Koestler was in fact a Communist, and had been a Communist since 1929) and left Seville just before a warrant was issued for his arrest. This account is followed by a historical retrospective of the reasons which led to war, the case against the Church, an examination of Nationalist propaganda and its relation to the facts, the story of the siege of the Alcazar and a description of Malaga in the days before the Nationalists arrived to take the town.

Even without knowing that Koestler was a Communist, the book is strikingly partisan, as noted by Orwell. The language used is emotive and sensational. The drama with which (admittedly dramatic) events are portrayed makes it difficult to trust the narrator, and his depiction of the Nationalist generals he meets feels propagandistic:

For some ten minutes he described in a steady flood of words, which now and then became extremely racy, how the Marxists slit open the stomachs of pregnant women and speared the foetuses; how they had tied two eight year old girls on to their father’s knees, violated them, poured petrol on them and set them on fire. This went on and on, unceasingly, one story following another – a perfect clinical demonstration in sexual psychopathology. Spittle oozed from the corners of the General’s mouth, and there was the same flickering glow which I had remarked in them during some passages of his broadcast...Some days later the Spanish consul in Gibraltar told me that on the occasion of an officers’ banquet in Teutun in the year 1926 he had seen Quiapo de Llano in an epileptic fit. (Koestler 1937: 34)

General Quiapo de Llano who ruled Nationalist Andalusia was certainly a strange character and his nightly broadcasts, ‘full of coarse and inconsequent ribaldries, of threats to kill the families of the ‘Reds’ on the Republican fleet, and of boasts of the terrible sexual powers of the legionaries and Regulares’ ( Thomas 1961: 63) were one of the more bizarre features of the regime, but in this portrait of the General Koestler is proving himself to be just as much of a propagandist. Despite his criticisms of the General’s ‘sexual psychopathology’, later on in his account he himself recounts a story from the siege of Toledo worthy of the General:

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, Zara González, a fourteen-year-old kitchen maid, crawled through the sewer into the town, where she collapsed unconscious in a pool of blood; in the hospital

she was just able, before losing consciousness again, to make a deposition to the effect that she had been violated by eight or nine officers in the Alcázar. Four days later she was dead...And the world goes on extolling the heroes of the Alcázar. (Koestler 1937: 159)

There are a couple of disparaging mentions of the POUM and the Anarchists but on the whole Koestler doesn't really engage with the split among the different factions on the Republican front. His account is mainly concerned with denying or excusing any reports of atrocities by Republican troops and listing the atrocities of the Nationalists. It is true that Republican atrocities were given much more press coverage by a media largely sympathetic to Franco's cause, but Koestler's method of redressing the balance seems a simplistic one, and his overblown, melodramatic prose weakens his case:

A million people breathed again. The rain lashed the faces of the defenders of Madrid, of the homeless women and children, and drenched them to the skin. In the mist, in the icy wind, in the blood-stained mire of the streets the slept, stretched out on the paving stones. At last, at last, they might venture to sleep. (Koestler 1937: 171)

The second part of *Spanish Testament*, Dialogue with Death, is the story of the fall of Malaga and Koester's arrest and imprisonment in first Malaga, then Seville. His time in prison is vividly recounted and feels much more sincere than the earlier part of *Spanish Testament*. In the opening pages Koestler is in Malaga, recently abandoned and awaiting the entrance of the Nationalists. Koestler's damning indictment of the Government is surprising, the first thing that suggests his re-evaluated loyalties:

The city was betrayed by its leaders – deserted, delivered up to the slaughter...The city was in the charge of men who proved incompetent...yet no less great is the responsibility of the Central Government of Valencia, which sent neither ships nor planes nor war material to Malaga... (Koestler 1937: 216)

#### 4.5 The God that Failed

Koestler discusses this period in prison and the resulting change in his political beliefs in *The God That Failed*, a collection of essays by ex-Communists such as Louis Fischer, Richard Wright and Stephen Spender. In Koestler's essay, he describes his conversion to Communism and frames it as a faith like any other:

To say that one had 'seen the light' is a poor description of the mental rapture which only the convert knows (regardless to what faith he has been converted). The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jig-saw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question; doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past...Nothing henceforth can disturb the convert's inner peace and serenity – except the occasional fear of losing faith again, losing thereby what alone makes life worth living, and falling back into the outer darkness... (Koestler 1950: 32)

Koestler was a member of the Communist Party for seven years, from 1931 until 1938. When he first joined he was a journalist at a large, liberal, democratic publishing organisation which published four Berlin dailies, evening papers, weekly and monthly periodicals and had its own news service. When it was suggested to him that he pass on any political gossip that he heard to the Party he did so without a qualm. 'I was already reaping the reward of all conversions, a blissfully clean conscience.' (Koestler 1950: 41) Koestler describes this period as one in which he retrained his mind to follow the Party line slavishly and without question. His language is that not of the political convert but of the religious, and he learned a complete intolerance for other left wing parties: 'Renegades from the Party were lost souls, fallen out of grace; to argue with them, even to listen to them, meant trafficking with the powers of Evil...The Fascist beasts were Fascist beasts, but our main preoccupation was the Trotskyite heretics and Socialist schismatics.' (Koestler 1950: 43) Through tortuous political dialectics Koestler's thought processes and instinctive reactions became, as he calls it, 'reconditioned':

You further learnt to prove, by the method of chain-deductions, that anybody who disagreed with you was an agent of Fascism, because (a) by his disagreeing with your line he endangered the unity of the Party; (b) by endangering the unity of the Party he improved the chances of a Fascist victory; hence (c) objectively he acted as an agent of Fascism, even if subjectively he happened to have his kidneys smashed to a pulp by the Fascists in Dachau. (Koestler 1950: 56)

The consequences of these beliefs, held with varying degrees of conviction by many Communists, can be seen in the liquidation of the POUM in Spain in 1937. However, by that point Koestler's politics had changed. His time in prison had an enormous effect on him.

I had made the acquaintance of a very different kind of reality, which had altered my outlook and values; and altered them so profoundly and unconsciously that in the first days of freedom I was not even aware of it...The lesson taught by this type of experience, when put into words, always appears under the dowdy guise of perennial commonplaces: that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction...that the end justifies the

means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment...every single one of these trivial statements was incompatible with the Communist faith which I held. (Koestler 1950: 76)

He wrote *Spanish Testament* after leaving prison and, once it was published, embarked on a lecture tour throughout England. Whenever he was asked about the POUM's activities, he answered that they were certainly not traitors, even if their policy wasn't good for unity, thus deviating completely from the Party line. When invited to give a talk on Spain to the German Emigré Writers' Association in Paris, a Party representative asked him to denounce the POUM as agents of Franco. Koestler refused. His audience were half Communists.

I knew it was my last public appearance as a member of the Party. The theme of the speech was the situation in Spain; it contained not a single word of criticism of the Party or of Russia. But it contained three phrases, deliberately chosen, because to normal people they were platitudes, to Communists, a declaration of war. The first was: No movement, party or person can claim the privilege of infallibility. The second was: Appeasing the enemy is as foolish as persecuting the friend who pursues your own aim by a different road. The third was a quotation from Thomas Mann: A harmful truth is better than a useful lie.

That settled it. When I had finished, the non-Communist half of the audience applauded, the Communist half sat in heavy silence, most of them with folded arms...You might as well have told a Nazi audience that all men are born equal, regardless of race and creed. A few days later I wrote my letter of resignation to the Central Committee of the Party. (Koestler 1950: 80)

Stephen Spender, another contributor to *The God That Failed*, was a member of the Communist Party very briefly during the winter of 1936 into 1937. Although he didn't fight in Spain, he joined the party 'in order to support them over Spain.' (Koestler 1950: 232) However, he traces the reasons for this attempt to 'compromise' with the Party as far back as childhood, when he had been profoundly influenced by the Christian idea that all men are equal in the eyes of God.

I can remember lying awake at night thinking of this human condition in which everyone living, without the asking, is thrust upon the earth...how unjust it seems that all men are not free to share what nature offers here; that there should be men and women who are not permitted to explore the world into which they are born, but who are throughout their lives sealed into leaden slums as into living tombs. It seemed to me – as it still seems – that the unique condition of each person within life outweighs the considerations which justify class and prejudice. However, I did not associate these ideas with being a revolutionary. They were Christian... (Koestler 1950: 233)

When Spender was sixteen he first came into contact with Socialism. Explained to him as a system where industries were nationalised so they produced wealth and resources for all the people of one country and gave all children of all classes equal opportunity, it seemed to correspond to his primitive ideas of social justice. Spender remained a Socialist, albeit in this abstract, detached way, throughout his university years. He moved to Germany after he left Oxford and it was here, amid the hyperinflation, the unemployment, the poverty and the sense of defeat, that the sense of humanity as social struggle reawakened within him.

‘Gradually I became convinced that the only cure for unemployment, other than war, was an international society in which the resources of the world were exploited in the interests of all the people of the world.’ (Koestler 1950: 235) During this period in Berlin Spender met an acquaintance, Chalmers, who had recently joined the Communist Party and had been on a tour of Russia. During their discussions of Communism, Spender confessed to his wish for ‘revolutionary changes which would produce a socially just international society without destroying the liberty of the individual.’ (Koestler 1950: 237) The Communist disregard for the liberty of the individual was the biggest hurdle for Spender to overcome: ‘I could not accept that it was necessary to deny to others the freedom to say what they believed to be true...I could not believe that it was politically reactionary to believe in God...’ (Koestler 1950: 241)

However, the 1930’s were times of extreme political positions, when people ‘weighed the evils of mass unemployment, Fascism and war against the evils of Communism, and hoped that Communism at least offered an end to these things...Soon the intellectual life of the 1930’s turned into a debate about Ends and Means.’ (Koestler 1950: 244) When the Spanish civil war broke out, public and political opinion was polarised by the intervention of Mussolini and Hitler, followed by that of the Soviet Union and the formation of the International Brigades. The outside forces fighting on either side made it easy to characterise the war as a battle between Fascism and democracy, ‘the centre of the struggle for the soul of Europe.’ (Koestler 1950: 245)

Spender travelled to Gibraltar, Oran and Tangiers in the early stages of the Spanish civil war. He was struck by the popular support for the Republic, and as impressed by the confidence and energy of the Communist groups as he was disgusted by the attitudes of the businessmen and government officials who supported Franco:



“What people at home don’t realise,” he said, “is that the Republicans aren’t our kind of democrat. Why, if you go out into the streets here and ask the first ten Spanish workers you meet which side they support, they will all say the Republic. It isn’t the British conception of democracy at all. It’s what ninety per cent of the people want.” (Koestler 1950: 245)

He travelled on to Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia and when he returned he took part in the campaign to raise awareness of the war in Britain and became a Communist Party member.

Pollitt’s appeal to me to help in Spain pushed me momentarily over into the Communist Party. Nevertheless, it was Spain which involved me in my first practical experience of working politically with other people. This action which had first made me a Party member also took me beyond and outside the Party. For I soon began to realise that even if the directing and organising force behind the support for the Spanish Republic was Communist, the real energy of the Popular Front was provided by those who had a passion for Liberal values. (Koestler 1950: 248)

Spender struggled with the Popular Front strategy of calling on all parties to form one group and then taking control as the Communists did within the Republican government. ‘To protest, as I sometimes futilely did, that this kind of unity was no unity but betrayal of the other parties from within’ (Koestler 1950: 253) was useless. It was explained to Spender by a political commissar in the Spain that ‘to say that the Communists in doing this represent betrayal of the other parties from within is a Fascist argument.’ (Koestler 1950: 253) This strategy was also used, on a smaller scale, within the International Brigades. Although a member of the Communist Party, Spender felt that their actions of uniting and then gaining control were a betrayal of the men, of many shades of political opinion, who had volunteered to fight in the International Brigades without realising the extent of Communist domination. When he raised these objections he was met once again with the argument that the end justifies the means:

When I returned to England I wrote an article protesting against the propaganda which enrolled young men in the International Brigades without it being explained to them that this was a Communist-controlled organisation. This article did not please the Communists. A few weeks later, in Valencia, I met the correspondent of a Communist paper. He said that he had seen my article and what I had written about Spain was true. He pointed out though that the important thing was to write that which would best serve the ends of winning the war and of Communism. (Koestler 1950: 249)

However, it was the Communist propaganda about the POUM after the May fighting in Barcelona that cemented Spender's disillusion with the party.

More sinister, though, than the propaganda of heroics was that of slanderous attack against groups within the Republic who were unfriendly to Communism. The liquidation of the Trotskyist organisation, the POUM, and the vilification of all its members as Fascists, was a stain on the Republic in the eyes of all who were not Communists...Propaganda which paints friends entirely white and enemies black persuades only those who are already convinced...It dismays those who are sympathetic to the cause but also open-eyed. (Koestler 1950: 250)

Spender notes that others had a similar reaction to the Communist spin about the May day fighting in Barcelona, and recounts the case of one man in particular, 'an American journalist, writing for a great British newspaper, and certainly one of the most distinguished sympathisers with the Republicans...He went to Barcelona at the time of the liquidation of the POUM. He repudiated the Communist-inspired version of the POUM activities, left Spain, and ceased to be a supporter of the Republic.' (Koestler 1950: 251) Spender had been prepared to struggle with the argument of ends and means, but had been naive about the level of self deception involved:

When I joined the Communist Party I expected that in doing so I would get to know what the Communists were doing; that I would be able to measure their means against the methods of capitalism; and that I would learn to accept the relationship of means with ends. I had not expected to find that the actions of the Communists in Russia and in Spain were denied by the Communists among themselves. (Koestler 1950: 262)

These denials proved to be the deciding factor in Spender's decision to distance himself from the Communist Party, and he later realised that a liberal socialist like him had never belonged in the party at all: 'It is clear to me now that I did not need to join the Communists because I had already taken sides. My side was whoever believed in social justice, freedom, and telling the truth about the methods which it was necessary to use in order to attain these ends.' (Koestler 1950: 271)

## 5. Creative Representation and Critical Reaction

It is seven decades since the start of the Spanish civil war, and yet, as its repeated use as a signifier of idealism in fiction illustrates, impressions made during, or arising from, the conflict continue to resound. Enduring interest in the war is evidenced by the stories of sacrifice which still surface in the media, by exhibitions of art and memorabilia and by the continually expanding wealth of historiographic material. (Shelmerdine 2006: 1)

Immediately after the war a huge number of books were published relating to the conflict. Many were collections of essays or writings, and memoirs like those detailed above. The conflict has transcended its historical context and, as Shelmerdine points out in the introduction to *British Representations of the Spanish Civil War*, is still the subject of films and books today. This section will explore the representation of the war in *L'espoir* (Man's Hope) by Andre Malraux, written while the conflict was still ongoing, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway, written immediately after the war and the film *Land and Freedom* by Ken Loach, made more recently, which deals with the events of the conflict and the issue of Communist control more directly. There will also be a brief discussion of reaction to these representations of the war.

### 5.1 *L'espoir* (Man's Hope) by Andre Malraux

When the Spanish Civil War broke out Andre Malraux was already an established writer and anti-fascist intellectual. He had published *La Condition Humaine* (Man's Fate) in 1933, which had been an immediate success. A fictionalised account of the communist defeat in Shanghai, it won the Prix Goncourt and established his international reputation as a revolutionary novelist. He was a member of several anti-fascist organisations, such as the *Comite mondial antifasciste*, and spoke at both the Moscow Writers' Congress in 1934 and the Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture, Paris, in 1935. Malraux made his way to Spain at the outbreak of the war to support the Republican government. He organised a foreign airforce, assuming its command and collecting French bombers for the squadron. He also personally flew sixty five missions and was wounded twice in the effort to stop Franco's march on Madrid. (Stoltzfus 1999: 180) He left Spain in 1937 and went to the United States, speaking publicly at events to raise money for the Republican cause and writing *L'espoir* (Man's Hope) which was made into a film in 1945.

Described by Stephen Spender as one of the 'two outstanding books of the Spanish War' (Koestler 1950: ) - the other being *For Whom the Bell Tolls* - Malraux's novel is a portrait of Republican Spain during the first nine months of civil war. It is comprised of a broad cast of characters, set on many different fronts and among different groups of the Popular Front. Malraux had left Spain by the time the 'civil war within a civil war' erupted in Barcelona, and it is not directly mentioned in the novel, but there is a keen awareness of the ideological conflicts between the different parties of the left wing from the first pages of the novel:

...the car moved off again amid back-slappings, uplifted fists and cries of *Salud*; and the darkness was all fraternity. And yet the conflict between right and left wing socialists – Caballero's antagonism to any idea of a Prieto cabinet – had been violent enough during these last few weeks...At the second sentry-post some F.A.I. were handing over a suspect to a group of U.G.T. workers, their former adversaries. (Malraux 1979: 11)

However, in the heady atmosphere of the rising, it seems that differences have been put aside in order to fight the Fascists. The first scenes are in Madrid, the Communists Ramos and Manuel transporting dynamite for the purpose of blowing bridges. The action swiftly moves to Barcelona, where the anarchists are engaged in street fighting with the soldiers, sympathetic to the Nationalists, who are attempting to take over the city. Puig and the Negus, two anarchist leaders, are co-ordinating the attack. As in Madrid, there is a feeling of solidarity among the left wing workers, of all ideologies, resisting the soldiers:

Round Puig were grouped the leaders of all Left-Wing parties; thousands of men behind them. For the first time, Liberals, members of the U.G.T. and C.N.T., anarchists, Republicans, trade unionists, and socialists joined in an attack on their common foe and his machine guns...Mingling at last today, all the various strains of the Asturian blood had brought about the unity of Barcelona... (Malraux 1979: 22)

However, as we move from battle to battle, front to front, this unity is undermined by the clash between idealism and practicality. The organising ability of the Communists is praised, and they are regarded as the best placed to resist the fascists within the Republican factions:

He had watched the battalions of the Fifth Regiment being trained; they were the best militia battalions, by and large. The whole army of the Popular Front might well be organised on the same lines. They, anyhow, had solved the crucial problem, the problem of revolutionary discipline. So Magnin regarded Enrique as one of the best organisers of the Spanish popular field force. (Malraux 1979: 155)

Certain individual Communists are also perceived by other characters as natural leaders of the army, given their talent for instilling discipline and organisation: 'He had not realised that the duties of a militant communist of the front rank demand strict discipline and great powers of persuasion. Manuel's experience as organiser, propagandist and man of action gave him the qualifications of a first-rate military leader.' (Malraux 1979: 163) However, there is a constant awareness that this zeal for discipline and organisation is not shared by all Republican groups, and, in some cases, actually undermines enthusiasm for the Republican cause. The action is broken up by several long discussions which evoke the passionate contemporary debates among revolutionary factions about the best way to fight the Fascists, the familiar tension between making the war and making the revolution:

"Still you can't deny it was the people's army that held the Sierra..."

"The people are magnificent," Vargas exclaimed. "Absolutely magnificent, Magnin – but helpless!"

"Let's get things straight," Garcia said, aiming his pipe stem at Magnin. "I was in the Sierra. Well, it took the fascists by surprise. The positions were particularly suited for guerrilla warfare, of course. The people have a striking power that can be terrific – only it doesn't last...We are not the revolution. Ask Vargas there what he thinks about it! We are the people, I grant, but not the revolution – though we used to talk of nothing else. By revolution I mean the change of system that follows a revolt; a change that's organised by political and expert groups formed during the conflict and capable of promptly destroying the regime that they've destroyed."

"And above all, Magnin," Vargas said, hitching up his *mono*, "don't forget it isn't we who started the present conflict. We haven't any organisation. Franco hasn't any either, except the army *cadres*, but he has with him the two nations you know of. No militia will ever defeat a modern army. Wrangel was beaten by the Red Army, not by enthusiastic partisans."

"From now on no social change, still less a revolution, can make good without war; and no war without organisation on the technical side." Garcia emphasised each point with a jab of his pipe stem...

"Organisation, discipline – I don't see men giving their lives for that!" Magnin exclaimed.

"In times like the present," Garcia said, "I'm less interested in the reasons men may have for giving up their lives than in the means they have for killing off their enemies..."

"You hear those sounds coming in through the window? Well, to me they're something real, concrete. Something which – you know it as well as I do – we're far from using to the best advantage. You say, we're not the revolution. Well, I say: let's be it!" (Malraux 1979: 113)

In this exchange between Magnin, the commander of the International Air Force, Garcia, an intellectual working for Intelligence, and Vargas, an officer, we can see the different positions and the problems inherent in each of them. There are several conversations

like this in *L'espoir*, where Malraux expounds at length on the issue of war vs. revolution. Like Orwell, he is eager to explore and understand the political issues which affect the practical course of the war, as are his characters. The flaws of the communist approach are explored repeatedly throughout the book. The Negus, an anarchist leader, rejects the Communist maxims of discipline and organisation:

But we're no use for 'dialectics' or red tape; delegates are all right, but bureaucrats never! Or an army to defeat the army, or inequality to stamp out inequality, or playing the bourgeois' game. What we are out for is to live the way men ought to live, right now and here,; or else to damn well die. If we fail, there's an end of it. No return ticket for me! (Malraux 1979: 200)

He is also critical of Communist attitudes towards the other groups fighting the Republicans:

But your lot are turning into a priesthood. I don't say communism's becoming a religion,; but I do say that communists are turning into priests. For you, being a revolutionary means just – just being cleverer than the next fellow. It wasn't like that with Bakunin or Kropotkin – not by a long shot! You're soaked in the Party, in discipline, in plotting and scheming. If a man doesn't belong, you don't give him a square deal; you've not a scrap of decency towards him. (Malraux 1979: 201)

Manuel, a Communist officer, recognises the deadening effects of working within the Communist system in a conversation with Ximenes. Having just ordered the execution of three men, he comments:

I knew what had to be done, and I did it. I'm determined to serve my Party, and I'm not going to let myself be deterred by any personal psychological reactions. I don't believe in regrets. But there's something else. You said to me once: 'It takes more nobility to be a leader of men than just to be oneself. Because it's harder.' Well, I'm becoming less and less 'myself'. Music, for instance...All that's over, so far as I'm concerned. Look here. Last week I slept with a woman who I'd loved in vain...for years. Well, after two wretched shots at it, I found myself wanting to get away....every step I've taken towards greater efficiency, towards becoming a better officer, has estranged me more and more from my fellow-men. Every day I'm getting a little less human. But I expect you've been up against the same thing?"

..."All that estranges you from your fellow-men is bound to link you up more closely with your Party..."

Manuel had thought so too, and sometimes with dismay. "To be linked more closely with the Party is worthless, if one's to be estranged from the very men for whom the Party's working. Whatever the Party is aiming at, that aim exists only as the aim of each and every one of us." (Malraux 1979: 407)

Manuel recognises that efficiency and humanity are two irreconcilable principles. He believes that efficiency is necessary to win the war, but also that it undermines the revolutionary fervour that was so universal at the beginning of the conflict and dehumanises him in the process.

Malraux presents the anarchists as ideologically purer than the Communists. In one of the earliest exchanges, Puig, an anarchist leader, in a conversation with Ximenes about religion, explains that he has turned his back on the Church, but not on God, nor art.

‘And...Christ?’

“He was an anarchist who succeeded. The only one.” (Malraux 1979: 32)

The Communist struggle for power is absent in the minds of the anarchists, their one preoccupation being the revolution, the breaking down of the accepted societal order. They are concerned with the more fundamental issue of changing the way that people live their lives.

“Even if we’re beaten here and at Madrid,” the Negus said, “at least the men will have given their hearts a few days’ fun. See what I mean? In spite of hatred. They’re free today. They’ve never been that before. I’m not thinking of political freedom, but another kind. See what I mean?” (Malraux 1979: 200)

There is a certain naivety in their approach, which is contrasted with the more practical concerns of the communists. Malraux, in a series of long conversations, attempts to get at the heart of the differences between the approach of the anarchist and that of the communist:

The communists, you see, *want to get things done*. Whereas you and the anarchists, for different reasons, want to *be* something. That’s the tragedy of a revolution like this one. Our respective ideals are so different; pacificism and the need to fight in self-defence; organisation and Christian sentiment; efficiency and justice – nothing but contradictions. We’ve got to straighten them out, transform our apocalyptic vision into an army – or be exterminated. (Malraux 1979: 212)

However, the characters, at the same time, are aware of the futility of these discussions, and what is at stake even while these points are being argued:

“And to think that throughout Spain,” he mused, “at this very hour exactly the same things are being said, most likely, at every luncheon table! How much better they’d employ their time hunting for some basis of co-operation, so as to implement the orders

of the Government by joint action between the various groups, communist, C.N.T., F.A.I. and U.G.T.! It's odd the weakness people have for arguing about anything and everything rather than the practical line of action to be followed, even at a moment when their lives hang on the line they choose." (Malraux 1979: 210)

Yet Malraux is aware of the necessity of examining the principles behind actions. Even in the midst of a revolutionary war he is aware of the need for a strong moral code. He makes the observation, several times, that the people are furious with the Church, precisely for not acting upon its principles, for seeking only power and wealth;

The peasants blamed the Church for having persistently backed the upper class, condoned the punitive measures which had followed the revolt in the Asturias, approved of the spoliation of the Catalonians, and always taught the poor folk a meek submission to injustice, while now the Church was sponsoring a Holy War against them. One of them disliked the priests' voices 'because they don't talk like proper human beings; many resented the harshness or hypocrisy – according to their rank – of the men the priests employed to bolster up their influence in the villages. All were indignant that, in the conquered villages, the priests had denounced to the fascists those who were 'irreligious', knowing full well that this consigned them to the firing squad. And all reproached the clergy for their wealth. (Malraux 1979: 176)

Malraux recognises that the working class and the peasants in Spain had turned against the Church because of this gap between their principles and their actions, and the way in which the beleaguered Spanish Republic replaced the Church as something to believe in:

The two groups (fascist officers and militiamen) were slinging insults at each other. The sight was all the quainter because each gesticulating group kept its distance, as if the intervening space were forbidden ground, and volleyed repartee without moving a step forward.

"...because we, anyhow, are fighting for an ideal, you bastards!" they heard a fascist shouting as they came up.

"What about us? I suppose we're fighting for our money-bags, you son of a bitch? Your ideal, eh? Ours is a finer one than yours, seeing as it's for everybody on earth...."

"...That's a good joke when people who burn churches start talking of ideals."

"If there weren't so many, we wouldn't have to burn them."

"Too many churches lined with gold, and too many villages with no food."

(Malraux 1979: 191)

Scali, the Italian, makes the observation that 'Among other functions, the revolution plays a part that an 'eternal life' used formerly to play.' (Malraux 1979: 323) Malraux's awareness of this makes the principles behind the revolution all the more crucial, leading to an implicit criticism of the Communists for their pragmatic approach to the conflict:



“I’m afraid you’ll very soon discover,” Pradas observed, “that, concretely speaking, that moral code of yours has no utility for practical politics.”

“No more has any other moral code,” a voice put in.

“And yet the trouble about the revolution,” Garcia said, “perhaps its tragedy, is that it can’t get on without one.” (Malraux 1979: 204)

Malraux admired the achievements of the Communists but not their ideology. This is made explicit in an exchange between Magnin and Garcia towards the end of the novel:

“It’s not communism that he is opposed to, it’s the Communist Party.”

“Tell me, commandante, what do you think of the communists?”

So that’s not finished yet, Garcia thought.

“My friend Guernico,” he answered, “says: ‘They have all the virtues of action and no others.’ But action is what matters just at present.” (Malraux 1979: 504)

The final pages of *L’espoir*, where all the leaders of the various Republican sections are gathered together, reinforces its non-sectarian presentation of politics and leadership. If it can be characterised politically, it is as an anti-fascist text, making a plea for defenders of the Spanish Republic to remain united against fascism. Its focus is not politics but the way in which people behave, the personal conflicts of conscience and reason, within the confines of their political ideology.

Malraux has demonstrated once more his fundamental absorption in the personal conflicts of conscience and reason that bring men to risk their lives for an ideal in which they may not wholly believe, or, if they believe, only with reservations. These spring from their desire to remain free of impersonal ideological checks upon their activity as human beings; it is humanity, in its essential dignity and freedom, which draws him to the revolutionary ideal, exclusive of party. (Lind 1939: 22)

*L’Espoir* was widely acclaimed upon publication. It was described by Time Magazine as ‘the best book to come out of the Spanish Civil War’ (Malraux 1979: 1) and critics viewed it as ‘unquestionably the finest novel yet written about the new world war in Spain’ (Lind 1939: 20). However, many critics, especially on the right, labelled it ‘propaganda’ and its author ‘Pro-Communist’. Malraux was described as an ‘ardent supporter of Stalin’ and *L’espoir* ‘a work of Communist propaganda’ and ‘an account of the Spanish civil war as seen by an orthodox Communist’ (Sypher 1986: 146). Other critics, however, commented ‘Malraux’s antifascist commitment, as expressed in *L’espoir*, is neither Stalinist nor counter-

revolutionary. His defence of democratic values is accompanied by an ongoing critique of communism and Stalinist values.’ (Stoltzfus 1999: 183)

The portrayal of Communists in *L’espoir* certainly seems to confirm this view. While Malraux undoubtedly admired the heroism of the men who fought under the Party’s leaders, and even those leaders themselves, the novel still critiques the communist perspective on the war, even though the author himself seems to have been broadly sympathetic to it at the time. He displayed a certain degree of tolerance for the distortions of Stalinism and the self serving policies of the Communist International during the war, to the point of stating, ‘I would do nothing against Stalin at the moment. I accepted the Moscow trials, and I am prepared to accept [the Communists’ murder of their left wing allies] in Barcelona.’ (Meyers 2006: 183) However, his alliance with communism has been described as essentially tactical, a theory borne out by the politics of *L’espoir*, with its pleas for unity among the left wing. By the end of the second world war, as a de Gaulle minister, he was publicly denouncing communism, saying in 1953, ‘I have not changed. It is the world, and most of all the communists, that have changed.’ (Wilkinson 1966: 47)

## 5.2 *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway

Spain was a country that Hemingway loved and felt to be a second home. He’d spent time in the country regularly since 1923, visiting Pamplona almost every year for the San Fermin festival and its many bullfights. Hemingway had first conceived of the project of *Death in the Afternoon*, a history of bullfighting and the culture surrounding it, illustrated with over a hundred photographs, in 1929. It was published in 1932, but the book was not well received. In the midst of the Great Depression, Hemingway’s subject matter seemed irrelevant to many of his countrymen and reviews were mainly hostile. (Wager-Martin 2007: 93) By the end of the decade, however, there was more of an appetite for fiction about Europe, as the Second World War had drawn the attention of Americans to the continent.

From the very start of the Spanish civil war, Hemingway assumed he would go to Spain. Not only did he have a personal attachment to the country, he also believed in the Republican cause, identifying it, as many did outside Spain, as part of a wider struggle against Fascism. He went to Spain as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance in February of 1937 and travelled back and forth between the two countries for the duration of the war,

spending long stretches of time in Madrid. He was close friends with several members of the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade. However, by June of 1937, many of them were dead, and he was very bitter about the course the war was taking.

The Spanish civil war seemed to galvanise Hemingway. He wrote a collection of stories about the war and also his only full length play, *The Fifth Column*, during 1937. He wrote commentary for a documentary film, *Spain in Flames*, and helped to gather and write material for another documentary, *The Spanish Earth*, directed by the Dutch Communist Joris Ivens, which he also narrated. He spoke at the Writers' Congress - described as a 'Moscow plot' by the Hearst papers (Wagner-Martin 2007: 93) - in June 1938 in support of the Republican cause. 'Although Hemingway was not a sophisticated political thinker, when he said that writers could not live under a Fascist regime, people understood his point of view and his anger.' (Wagner-Martin 2007: 93)

However, despite his support of the Republicans, and his friendship with several Party members, Hemingway could not be described as a Communist;

He had been arguing against taking political positions in writing for years. In 1932, he had written Paul Romaine that he did not intend to take 'the Leftward Swing' (which he called 'so much horseshit'). Hemingway's manifesto was, rather, that he did not 'follow the fashions in politics, letters, religion.' He also railed against Communism...Writers now cannot be coerced into being political: the writer is by nature and trade 'an outlyer like a Gypsy.' To Kashkin (a Russian critic) he repeated, 'I cannot be a communist now because I believe in only one thing: liberty.' (Wagner-Martin 2007: 114)

This sentiment can be traced in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It is the story of the final days in the life of Robert Jordan, a liberal American professor who has volunteered to fight in Spain. Although he reports to Golz, a Russian Communist and army commander, Jordan does not fight in the front line with the International Brigades. Instead he works mostly behind the lines with guerrilla groups, and his area of expertise is dynamiting. He arrives in the Sierra de Guadarrama mountains to organise the explosion of a bridge to coordinate with the beginning of a Republican offensive against the city of Segovia, with the help of a local antifascist guerrilla group. The leader of the group, Pablo, is against this action, complaining that it will necessitate the group's removal to another area. However he is contradicted by 'his woman', Pilar, who assures Jordan that the bridge will be blown, and the rest of the group agree to give him the support he needs. Pilar takes him to meet another guerrilla group, that of El Sordo, who will also help them with blowing the bridge. Jordan falls in love with Maria, a young

woman rescued from the group's last action, the blowing up of a train. Maria is traumatised by her war experience, the execution of her parents and her rape by Nationalist soldiers. However, Jordan's feelings for her are returned, and during their few days together they feel a profound and intense love for one another. This love and the appetite for life that it provokes clashes with Jordan's sense of duty and undermines his willingness to carry out Golz's orders, as he foresees that they will not escape from the Nationalists' reprisals. The day before the bridge blowing, El Sordo's guerrilla band are surrounded and killed by the Nationalists, and that night Pablo decides to steal the detonation caps for the explosion, throwing them away into a gorge. Jordan is able to improvise but the explosion will be more difficult and more dangerous. Pablo returns to assist with the action and the bridge is successfully blown, although several of the guerrillas are killed. During the group's escape, however, Jordan's horse falls and he breaks his leg. Knowing that he will only slow down the rest of the group, he says goodbye to Maria and remains behind.

The tension between political beliefs and personal desire is at the heart of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. There is a lot of political discussion throughout the book, and Hemingway, through the various characters, illustrates the differing political positions of those defending the Republic.

The guerrillas are for the most part Republicans. Pilar both identifies herself as a Republican – 'I have been a Republican for twenty years' (Hemingway 1999: 69) and is described by other members of the group as 'very loyal to the Republic.' (Hemingway 1999: 65) She talks about her belief in the Republic, explicitly likening it to a religion. 'I put great illusion in the Republic. I believe firmly in the Republic and I have faith. I believe in it with fervour as those who have religious faith believe in the mysteries.' (Hemingway 1999: 96) This religiosity among the guerrillas is highlighted in the final moments of Joaquin, a young Communist who is part of El Sordo's band.

"Pasionaria says "Better to die on thy-" 'Joaquin was saying to himself as the drone came nearer them. Then he shifted suddenly into 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; Blessed art thou among women and Blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Holy Mary, Mother of God,' he started, then he remembered quickly as the roar came now unbearably and started an act of contrition racing in it, 'Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee who art worthy of all my love-" (Hemingway 1999: 333)

Anselmo, like Pilar, is a staunch Republican, and although he is very uneasy about killing other men, even Fascists, he is prepared to commit this 'great sin' for the cause. He has the same quasi-religious faith in the Republic as Pilar and Joaquin:

One thing I have that no man nor any God can take from me and that is that I have worked well for the Republic. I have worked hard for the good that we will all share later. I have worked my best from the first of the movement and I have done nothing that I am ashamed of. All I am sorry for is the killing...Later on there may be certain days that one can work for the state or something that one can do that will remove it...as in the days of the Church. (Hemingway 1999: 206)

Jordan is identified early on as an anti-fascist.

"He is a communist," Maria said. "They are very serious *gente*."  
"Are you a communist?"  
"No I am an anti-fascist."  
"For a long time?"  
"Since I have understood fascism."  
"How long is that?"  
"For nearly ten years." (Hemingway 1999: 69)

Jordan is no adventurer; he has come to Spain to fight against fascism, which he feared and resisted long before the start of the civil war. He describes his early war experiences, fighting with a brigade, as feeling as though he was:

taking part in a crusade...It was a feeling of consecration to a duty towards all of the oppressed of the world which would be as difficult and embarrassing to speak about as religious experience...It gave you a part in something that you could believe in wholly and completely and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it. (Hemingway 1999: 243)

Jordan is no longer in this 'state of grace.' (Hemingway 1999: 245) He has become more cynical. 'What were his politics then? He had none now, he told himself.' (Hemingway 1999: 170) Despite his lack of politics, however, Jordan is completely committed to the Republican cause, seeing himself and the guerrillas as mere tools to carry out an order. He admires the discipline and determination of the Communists.

Here in Spain the Communists offered the best discipline and the soundest and sanest for the prosecution of the war. He accepted their discipline for the duration of the war because, in the conduct of the war, they were the only party whose program and whose discipline he could respect. (Hemingway 1999: 170)

He also sympathises with the Communist point of view that the most important thing is to win the war when in discussion with the guerrillas, even if it means putting aside the revolution.

“Are we to win this war and lose the revolution?”

“Nay,” Robert Jordan said. “But if we do not win this war there will be no revolution nor any Republic nor any thou nor any me nor anything but the most grand *carajo*.”

“So say I,” Anselmo said. “That we should win the war.”

“And afterwards shoot the anarchists and the Communists and all this *canalla* except the good Republicans,” Agustin said. (Hemingway 1999: 295)

However, despite Jordan’s sympathies with their actions in Spain, he is quite definitely not a Communist, something which is underlined several times. He has a natural distrust of Communist dogma and bigotry:

Enemies of the people. That was a phrase he might omit. That was a catch phrase he would skip...He had gotten to be as bigoted and hide-bound about his politics as a hard-shelled Baptist and phrases like enemies of the people came into his mind without his much criticising them in any way. Any sort of clichés both revolutionary and patriotic. His mind employed them without criticism. Of course they were true but it was too easy to be nimble about using them...To be bigoted you have to be absolutely sure that you are right and nothing makes that surety and righteousness like continence. (Hemingway 1999: 171)

There are two main sections of the book which portray the Communists in a negative light. One is the long description of Gaylord’s, the hotel in Madrid the Russians had taken over. Jordan’s loss of innocence is measured by his changing reaction to the place.

Gaylord’s itself had seemed indecently luxurious and corrupt. But why shouldn’t the representatives of a power that governed a sixth of the world have a few comforts? Well, they had them and Robert Jordan had at first been repelled by the whole business and then had accepted it and enjoyed it...At one time he had thought Gaylord’s had been bad for him. It was the opposite of the puritanical, religious communism of Velazquez 63, the Madrid palace that had been turned into the International Brigade headquarters in the capital. At Velazquez 63 it was like being a member of a religious order – and Gaylord’s was a long way away from the feeling you had at the headquarters... (Hemingway 1999: 240)

Gaylord’s is where Jordan sees behind the curtain, in a sense. Here he comes to understand how much influence the Russians have had, even since before the conflict: ‘Gaylord’s was the place where you met famous peasant and worker Spanish commanders

who had sprung to arms from the people at the start of the war without any previous military training and found that many of them spoke Russian. That had been the first big disillusion to him.’ (Hemingway 1999: 237) His friend Karkov, a Russian journalist, epitomises this cynicism in several exchanges with Jordan, which are almost Orwellian.

“I thought that you did not believe in political assassination.”

“It is practised extensively,” Karkov said. “Very, very extensively.”

“But-”

“We do not believe in acts of terrorism by individuals,” Karkov had smiled. “But certainly we execute and destroy such veritable fiends and dregs of humanity and the treacherous dogs of generals and the revolting spectacle of admirals unfaithful to their trust. These are destroyed. They are not assassinated. You see the difference?” (Hemingway 1999: 255)

They also discuss the May fighting in Barcelona and the POUM. Karkov was there during the fighting and tells Jordan the ‘truth’ about what happened.

“...Barcelona makes you laugh.”

“What about the POUM putsch?”

“The POUM were never really serious. It was a heresy of crackpots and wild men and it was really just an infantilism...The poor POUM. They were silly people.”

“But were many killed in the putsch?”

“Not as many as were shot afterwards or will be shot...Poor POUM. They never did kill anybody. Not at the front nor anywhere else. A few in Barcelona, yes.”

“Were you there?”

“Yes. I have sent a cable describing the wickedness of that infamous organisation of Trotskyite murderers and their fascist machinations all beneath contempt, but between us, it is not very serious, the POUM.” (Hemingway 1999: 256)

At Gaylord’s Jordan is educated in a way by Karkov, who puts forward the classic argument about means and ends, and Jordan comes round to his way of thinking a little: ‘He had learned that. If a thing was right fundamentally the lying was not supposed to matter. There was a lot of lying though. He did not care for the lying at first. He hated it. Then later he had come to like it. It was part of being an insider but it was a very corrupting business.’

(Hemingway 1999: 238) However, this is qualified a page or so later. ‘But now he knew enough to accept the necessity for all the deception and what he learned at Gaylord’s only strengthened him in his belief in the things that he did hold to be true. He liked to know how it really was; not how it was supposed to be. There was always lying in a war.’ (Hemingway 1999: 239) Jordan doesn’t necessarily approve; as with so many of the Communists’ actions,

he accepts the necessity in times of war but doesn't go further than that, and his main concern is that he knows the lies for what they are and so has access to 'how it really is'.

There are some scathing portraits of individual, high up Communists in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, notably Andre Marty and La Pasionaria. Andre Marty is described in the most damning terms:

"He may be a glory and all," said the corporal, putting his hand on Andres's shoulder. "But he is crazy as a bedbug. He has a mania for shooting people."

"Truly shooting them?"

"Como los oyes," said the corporal. "That old one kills more than the bubonic plague...But he doesn't kill fascists like we do. *Que va*. Not in joke. *Mata bichos raros*. He kills rare things. Trotskyites. Divagationers. Any type of rare beasts."

Andres did not understand any of this.

"When we were at Escorial we shot I don't know how many for him," the corporal said. "We always furnish the firing party. The members of the Brigades would not shoot their own men. Especially the French. To avoid difficulties it is always we who do it. We shot French. We have shot Belgians. We have shot others of divers nationality. Of all types. *Tiene mania de fusilar gente*. Always for political things. He's crazy." (Hemingway 1999: 436)

La Pasionaria is also criticised by the ordinary Spaniards. When El Sordo's men are surrounded on the hilltop, knowing that they will be killed before dawn, her slogans seem immaterial to the battle facing them, especially with the revelation that her son is safely out of danger.

Joaquin said, bringing them out as though they were talismans, "Pasionaria says it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees."

"*Mierda* again," the man said and another man said, over his shoulder, "We're on our bellies, not our knees."

"Thou. Communist. Do you know your Pasionaria has a son thy age in Russia since the start of the movement?"

"It's a lie," Joaquin said.

"*Que va*, it's a lie," the other said. "The dynamiter with the rare name told me. He was of thy party, too. Why should he lie?"

"It's a lie," Joaquin said. "She would not do such a thing as keep a son hidden in Russia out of the war." (Hemingway 1999: 319)

The anarchists also come in for criticism. There is no detailed examination of their political views or prominent anarchist figures as there is with the Communists, but there are several throwaway comments, made not just by Jordan but by the guerrillas too. Pilar describes them



as drunks and madmen when she is telling Jordan about the killing of the fascists orchestrated by Pablo:

Two men had fallen down and lay on their backs in the middle of the square and were passing a bottle back and forth between them. One would take a drink and then shout, "*Viva la Anarquia!*" lying on his back and shouting as though he were a madman. He had a red-and-black handkerchief around his neck. The other shouted, "*Viva la Libertad!*" and kicked his feet in the air and then bellowed, "*Viva la Libertad!*" again. He had a red-and-black handkerchief too and he waved it in one hand and waved the bottle with the other. (Hemingway 1999: 126)

She sees them as worse than useless in the fight against Fascism: 'It would have been better for the town if they had thrown over twenty or thirty of the drunkards, especially those of the red-and-black scarves, and if we ever have another revolution I believe they should be destroyed at the start.' (Hemingway 1999: 133) Andres feels the same.

He did not like these people who were like dangerous children; dirty, foul, undisciplined, kind, loving, silly and ignorant but always dangerous because they were armed. He, Andres, was without politics except that he was for the Republic. He had heard these people talk many times and he thought what they said was often beautiful and fine but he did not like them. (Hemingway 1999: 393)

The novel is very even-handed in its portrayal of both communists and Anarchists. Neither party is posited as the one that has found the correct way of resisting the Fascists and the novel's fairness is one of its strengths.

The book is engaged with one of the great political events and some of the great political issues of the time, and one of its most impressive features is its undogmatic fairness. Although acknowledgedly committed to the Spanish Republican cause and against Fascism and the Fascist government of Spain, it is never propaganda. The author emphasises, rather than conceals, the brutalities of the Republicans; he is compassionate towards those individual Spaniards who fought for fascism even though he manifests hate for the fascist order. He is generally a sympathetic admirer of the Communists in Spain, but remains aloof from them: he shows their spots, as well as virtues, and is careful to make plain that communism and republicanism are not the same, though they are cobelligerents. (Williams 1981: 138)

Although there is no criticism of the politics of the Republicans, Hemingway takes pains to emphasise not only the acts of brutality that were carried out in the name of the Republic, such as the killing of the fascists in Pablo's village, but also the humanity of their supposed

enemies. Lieutenant Berrendo is portrayed as a good man, even as he kills the young Communist, Joaquin.

Joaquin was bleeding from the nose and from the ears. He had known nothing and had no feeling since he had suddenly been in the very heart of the thunder and the breath had been wrenched from his body when the one bomb struck so close and Lieutenant Berrendo made the sign of the cross and then shot him in the back of the head, as quickly and as gently, if such an abrupt movement can be gentle, as Sordo had shot the wounded horse. (Hemingway 1999: 333)

For Hemingway the humanity of his characters is far more important than their politics, and this is reflected in Jordan's attitude to the war and his political beliefs.

You believe in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. You believe in Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Don't ever kid yourself with too much dialectics. They are for some but not for you. You have to know them in order not to be a sucker...But afterwards you can discard what you do not believe in...What you have with Maria, whether it lasts just through today and a part of tomorrow, or whether it lasts for a long life is the most important thing that can happen to a human being. (Hemingway 1999: 315)

As implied in this excerpt, his relationship with Maria affects his political commitment. He still has a strong sense of duty, emphasised again and again in the inner monologues, but he is no longer as willing to die for the cause:

Maria was very hard on his bigotry. So far she had not affected his resolution but he would much prefer not to die. He would abandon a hero's or a martyr's end gladly...No. He would like to spend some time with Maria. That was the simplest expression of it. He would like to spend a long, long time with her. (Hemingway 1999: 173)

He will not abandon his mission, although it becomes more and more complicated, but he has a presentiment that these orders will cost him his life. He resents it, even early in the book, but stops himself quickly:

He resented them for what they could do to him and for what they could do to this old man. They were bad orders all right for those who would have to carry them out. And that is not the way to think, he told himself, and there is not you, and there are not people that things must not happen to. Neither you nor this old man is anything. You are instruments to do your duty. (Hemingway 1999: 46)

But when it comes to the day of the attack, after the last few days with Maria, he does, in fact, resent the orders deeply. Life has become more important to him than the struggle.

‘Maria is my true love and my wife. I never had a true love. I never had a wife. She is also my sister, and I never had a sister, and my daughter, and I will never have a daughter. I hate to leave a thing that is so good.’ (Hemingway 1999: 397)

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* was published in October 1940 to immediate critical acclaim and commercial success. It received the best reviews of any of Hemingway’s work yet, and it was a Book of the Month Club selection which sold out before it was even published. Within a few weeks Paramount pictures offered \$100,000 (and a provision for each copy sold) for its movie rights. (Wagner-Martin 2007: 133) In the trailer for the film, it is called ‘The Most Widely Read Book of our Time’ and ‘Hemingway’s Celebrated Novel.’

Called a ‘magnificent romance,’ ‘uplifting’ and ‘his finest’, the novel, according to John Chamberlain [a literary critic involved in left-wing political causes] ‘redeems a decade of futility’ during which Hemingway was writing non-fiction. While there were detractors, usually critics on the left, claiming that Hemingway had not understood what was going on in Spain, the praise overwhelmed the criticism. (Wagner-Martin 2007: 133)

Hemingway was very popular in the Soviet Union before the Spanish civil war. He was first published there in 1934. Although, as seen above, he rejected political writing, by the middle thirties the ‘Popular Front’ strategy of the Soviet Union had led to ‘increased tolerance of ‘bourgeois’ writers and urged the cultivation of political allies among Western intellectuals. Hemingway was an active antifascist, and Soviet Union was particularly anxious to lend a helping hand to those whom it considered its potential friends.’ (Brown 1953: 144)

His earlier works, such as *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *To Have and To Have Not* were published and serialised in magazines, along with a collection of excerpts from four of his books, and his stories were also printed frequently. Although Hemingway’s themes were not those of revolutionary socialism, nor his heroes particularly socially engaged, this early work did contain a fixation with death and a subsequent tone of pessimism, hopelessness and fatality. A disillusionment and general cynicism were also present, and Soviet critics found in this a rejection of the bourgeois capitalist culture that Hemingway was part of.

The necessity of returning to life in these decadent surroundings, so the Soviet interpretation goes, solidified the feeling of moral devastation in the author. Acutely perceiving the ugliness and purposelessness of existence under the conditions of

capitalism, he became the prey of a chronic and bottomless scepticism, denying all ideals... (Brown 1953: 146)

Within a few short years he was very well known and respected by critics and authors alike, to the extent that, in 1937, when fifteen leading Soviet authors were asked by the editors of a literary magazine to name their favourite foreign author, nine of them named Hemingway. When the Spanish civil war broke out, Hemingway's departure for Spain was 'widely heralded in the Soviet Union' (Brown 1953: 153), and his play, *The Fifth Column*, was the first thing to reach Soviet readers. 'The critics reacted to this work with complete and unanimous enthusiasm,' (Brown 1953: 154) seeing in it Hemingway at last dealing with the themes of social destiny they had previously found lacking in his work.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* was not published in Russia, despite the fact that it was translated, and the manuscript passed around the Soviet literary world.

A few remarks made by the critic Mendelson in 1947 help to explain its suppression. Mendelson complained that Hemingway had proved incapable of dealing with 'advanced' ideas, and that he had 'perverted the meaning of many of the most important points of the civil war in Spain'. He had failed to 'humanise' his hero, and had made him the protagonist of the 'American ideals of agrarian democracy of the middle of the past century.' Hemingway's only genuinely positive characters, according to Mendelson, were his Spanish partisans. And his treatment of Andre Marty and other 'international figures' was 'absolutely distorted'. (Brown 1953: 155)

### 5.3 *Land and Freedom* by Ken Loach

Like Hemingway's novel, *Land and Freedom* was accused of similar distortions when it was released, almost 55 years later. Jim Allen, the screenwriter of *Land and Freedom*, describes the Spanish civil war as 'the last of the great causes- the issue was simple and clear cut. It was good against evil, it was fascism against democracy.' (Land and Freedom 1995)

However the issues that *Land and Freedom* deals with are far more complex. The film dramatises the conflict that arose between the Communists and the Anarchists/POUMists and explores the debate around land collectivisation and the absorption of the militias into the Popular Army.

The central character is David Carr, a Communist from Liverpool who makes his way to Spain to fight for the Republic. He meets a French anarchist on the train to Barcelona,

Bernard, and together they join a militia which happens to be affiliated to the POUM. On his arrival, the captain explains the position to him. 'To the west of us are the Anarchists and we fight together, comrades in arms, to defeat and destroy the Fascists and make the workers' and peasants' revolution.'

Carr writes home to his girlfriend that he is not in Communist brigade, but 'it doesn't matter, because we're all fighting the same enemy.' This establishes his idealism about the war but also his political naivete at the beginning of his civil war experience.

The first battle sees the unit attacking a village held by the Fascists. The action was successful and the Fascists were driven out of the village. The priest, who had been firing on the villagers and the militia from the steeple of the church, was executed, and the villagers have a debate about whether or not to collectivise the land. There is a long discussion where the villagers and the soldiers outline the various standpoints on collectivisation according to their politics. In this twelve minute sequence Loach portrays the split between the factions of the left with regards to collectivising the land, the Communist character in clear opposition with the others. Bernard states that 'Private ownership must be given up, cancelled, forgotten...it maintains the people in [a] capitalist mentality.' Lawrence, the American takes a pragmatic approach, typical of a Communist: 'This is not the time for these textbook arguments about socialism or land reform: we have to defeat Fascism, that's the priority...These people cannot collectivise anything if they're dead.'

The discussion develops into the wider issue of which should be prioritised; the war or the revolution, and Laurence goes on to make the Popular Front argument that revolution will only scare away any capitalist countries that might help. The other characters argue that making the revolution will inspire the working classes in other countries to support them. 'These people think they have something, but they have nothing. We have to show the people that, that we're poor but we're alive and we've got power now, we don't have to be seized by fear.' Bernard, the French volunteer, says 'working people around the world are looking to us now...it is not the right time to fight each other but together.' Jimmy, a Scottish volunteer, makes the point that collectivisation will increase the peasants' support for the Republic. For the most part uneducated and illiterate, a vigorous programme of land reform would have given them something tangible to fight for. 'We need to look to the two million landless peasants...unless we harness that energy now, the ideas will be dead, there'll be no change, and this will all be in vain.'

David is less sure. Although he comments ‘Unless we win the war there’s no point in having the ideology’, he states his case less forcibly than Laurence which creates the impression that he is more open and accepting of the various shades of political opinion throughout the group. The discussion ends in a vote for collectivisation.

After the group has been together some time, there is another, similar scene where Loach opens up the action to allow a space for the conflicting political positions at the heart of the conflict to be explored. Miguel, the captain, receives a summons to go to the command post to discuss the integration of the militias into the new Communist led Popular Army. He states that if they refuse, the government will continue to withhold arms from them. Laurence again takes the pragmatic approach: ‘we have to try to see the reality of the situation here...the best training is going to come from a regular disciplined army.’ Many of the soldiers are against the idea, and Bernard, the main critic of the Communist position, points out that ‘the creation of a new army with its saluting, discipline, military hierarchy will destroy the revolutionary spirit of the people, ok? It’s exactly what Stalinists expect.’ David disagrees: ‘That makes no sense Bernard. The Communist party was set up for revolution. Why would it want to suppress a revolutionary spirit?’ But Bernard identifies the militia as the heart of the struggle, and Jimmy points out that if they accept the better weapons, they come with conditions. Again, they vote as a group to keep the militia, and David, convinced by the arguments of the others, votes with them.

In the next scene, when training villagers, David is injured by a defective rifle that backfires into his shoulder. As a result Laurence leaves the militia, seeing their vote as a vote for faulty equipment. David is taken to hospital and then goes to Barcelona, where Blanca, one of the militiawomen, is waiting for him. She discovers that he has signed up for the Popular Army too, and they have an argument.

“Yeah I fought with the POUM, but look what fucking happened to me, I got a big piece of metal in my arm.”

“But you know perfectly well why...you know they refuse us arms. David, the Stalinists are betraying the revolution.”

“I came to Spain to fight for socialism, to fight for the Republic, and the best way I can think to do that is with the International Brigades, and if what you’re saying is true I’m sure there’s a good reason, an explanation of some sort.”

“Of course it’s true, and there is an explanation. It’s called Stalinism.”

Blanca goes back to the front and David, left in Barcelona, gets caught up in the May fighting. He is fighting on the side of the Communists, but is sickened and disillusioned by the whole thing. In a letter home, he says, 'The Party stinks, Kit. And I never thought I'd see the day where I'd say that. It's evil and corrupt. In Barcelona I saw good comrades snatched off the streets and executed, others disappeared into torture chambers, and it's still going on.' After the fighting is over, he rips up his Communist Party card and makes his way back to the militia group at the front.

One of the last scenes in the film is the aftermath of a battle. The group are resting. Some of them are wounded, Jimmy among them, and Blanca and Maite, the other militiawomen, are bandaging their wounds. Suddenly two trucks drive up and a company of soldiers disembarks. In contrast to the ragged militia they are in smart khaki uniforms, and Laurence is with them. The militia are told that the POUM has been made illegal and the soldiers have come to forcibly disband the unit, sending them home apart from the leaders who are to be arrested on charges of conspiracy with the Fascists and collaborating with Franco. The scene is one of chaos, the militiamen shouting at the soldiers, the Popular Army officer demanding that they give up their weapons. Several of the militia are weeping with rage and frustration – 'we've fought for nothing, comrades.' The confrontation escalates and Blanca is killed.

The final scene of the film is the present day funeral of David Carr. His granddaughter drops a handful of earth from the grave of Blanca, collectivised land, on to the coffin, and raises her hand in the clenched fist salute.

*Land and Freedom* takes the same political perspective of the conflict as *Homage to Catalonia*, which Loach says was one of the main starting points for the script. And like Orwell's account of his time in Spain, *Land and Freedom* ignited bitter debate when it was released. Some of the reaction to the film comes from predictable quarters; a review of Loach's work, including *Land and Freedom*, in the Daily Mail comments:

But what is truth in the hands of this Marxist propagandist? Loach makes low-budget films with amateur actors, which has given him the freedom to roam with his campaigning camera and small crew... In the hands of this Warwickshire-born Trotskyite, the film *Land And Freedom* (which told of a young Scouser who fights for republicans in Spain in 1936) is as savage an attack on Stalin as it is on fascism... Of course, there is no doubting his artistic talent, his breadth, his imagination, his commitment and even his humour. Yet Loach is so mired in the past that he seems

incapable of making a film that is not, at bottom, old-fashioned propaganda. (Edwards 2006)

There were more positive reviews from less right wing reviewers:

The establishment has preferred a view of history in which the extremists of Fascism and Communism fought each other in a far off foreign land. It is in this context that Loach's film should be seen, helping in some way to tell stories which have for too long been obscured or distorted by established interests. (Quickenden 1995)

It attracted vitriol, however, from the remaining veterans of the conflict, who disagreed with the portrayal of politics in the film, accusing Loach of misrepresentation.

A group of International Brigade veterans, mainly with Communist sympathies, was invited to a preview of *Land and Freedom* in London last month. Afterwards, they rounded on Jim Allen, the screenwriter, and Loach himself. The film focused on a tiny part of the war, they said... The angry veterans concluded that the POUM had opted out of the combined struggle by trying to advance its own agenda, and Loach's argument about betrayal was therefore a travesty. One veteran even said he hoped his grandchildren would not see the film. (Steele 1995)

Bill Alexander, who'd been the final leader of the British Battalion, went further and saw a conspiracy behind Loach's work:

The bourgeois ideological offensive taking place at the present time explains the £2.5 million supplied to Ken Loach from some very dubious quarters to enable him to make the film *Land and Freedom*, which so glorifies certain Anarchist factions which acted in a counter-revolutionary fashion during the Spanish Civil War, and which so denigrates the real heroes of that war - the Communists from Spain and other countries who fought for the Republic - and the international working-class movement, especially the Soviet Union, and still more especially, that most deadly enemy of the bourgeoisie, Comrade Stalin. [After some discussion of the history] It is clear from all I have said that by far the most important front at the time the events in his film supposedly take place was the Madrid front. Why did he not make a film about that? Why did he not portray the exceptional heroism of the people of Madrid as German shells fell all around them? That would have been a film worth making. Why has Loach been given so much money to make such a film? Why is Orwell being taught in the schools as if he were a great author? It can only be that the ruling circles in imperialist countries want to lower people's vigilance against fascism. (Alexander 1996)

This criticism is difficult to take seriously given the conspiracy suggested by Alexander, but the violence of his language shows that, to the people involved, the question of how the war should have been fought was never settled and still matters passionately to the



participants. Michael O’Riordan, author of a history of the Irish International Brigadiers and Chair of the Communist Party of Ireland supported Alexander’s position:

The film also gives the false impression that 'no pasaran' (they shall not pass) was a slogan of the pseudo-revolutionary POUM organisation which was playing at revolution when the task was to defend democratic government. The slogan was coined by the Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (known as La Passionaria) and was the slogan of the pro-government forces, not a POUM slogan. Finally, the film gives a totally misleading picture of the experiences of the 45,000 volunteers, 145 of them from Ireland, who fought in the International Brigade. (O’Riordan 1996)

A review of the film on the Communist Party website states that ‘the political Interpretation of the Spanish Civil War...is the film's weakness, providing a distorted view of one of this century's greatest political conflicts and denigrating many of those who took part.’ It goes on to state:

Obviously, Loach and his pals would have supported one of the many insignificant leftist groupings that continue to plague Spanish politics. They would most certainly have had the support of International finance capital as they always have done. Loach should be asking why it is that his financial backers, the BBC and the European Co-production Fund (UK), are prepared to lay out so much money to ensure that history is rewritten to reflect the interests of the establishment. There have been a million and one crimes committed in the name of communism. The defeat of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War was not one of them. (Sawtell 1996)

Again, this criticism is difficult to take seriously, but it shows that the interpretation of events of the Spanish civil war is still being argued over, even by those who were not involved in the conflict.

However, for ex-POUM militants in Spain, Land and Freedom acknowledges a part of their history that they’d believed suppressed forever. Joan Rochabert, leader of a militia centuria during the war, advised on the film. ‘It is his memory of being arrested when the regular Republican army disarmed the militias which laid the basis for the climactic scene in Loach's film.’ Another POUM militant, Pilar Santiago, says that her worst memory of the conflict is her husband’s death, but her second worst is the accusation of collaborating with the Fascists and betraying the Republic. ‘We found it was being broadcast by POUM people who had gone over to the Communists - typical Stalinist smear tactics...She welcomes Loach's film as a ‘window of opportunity’, provoking a belated historical debate in Spain. Rocabert, too,

believes that the tacit agreement not to talk about the civil war after the peaceful transition from Fascism after 1975 should lapse now.' (Steele 1995)

David Archibald, in an article entitled *The war that won't die*, explores the significance of these reactions.

Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* was released in 1995 amidst a flurry of critical praise and political debate. Using as its starting point George Orwell's classic autobiographical account, *Homage to Catalonia*, *Land and Freedom* focuses on the bitter internal struggles within the republican movement that assisted the fascists' victory. Like *Why Did We Lose the War?*, by re-examining the debates over the need for a revolutionary war to defeat Franco, Loach attempts to rehabilitate the war's revolutionary dimensions, suggesting that the conflict was more than a simple struggle between fascism and democracy. The closing slow-motion shooting of Blanca, a metaphorical representation of the betrayal of the revolution by the Spanish communists, caused bitter controversy and kick-started a reappraisal of the conflict inside Spain. The furore provoked by *Land and Freedom* confirms the importance of cinematic images to contemporary audiences' understanding of the past. (Archibald 2000)

The ensuing debate over the film and the merits of Loach himself points more to success than failure. In taking any stance, a piece on the Spanish civil war must always find dissenters, showing that communism and the war resonate still. A film which failed to ignite fierce opposition would be the true betrayal.

## 6. Conclusion

The Spanish Civil War was a cause that, at the time, energised the left wing movement throughout the world. The official estimate for the number of foreigners that fought in the International Brigades is 40,000. This figure does not include the other 5000 men who fought in other units of the Republicans armies or airforce. Tens of thousands of ordinary working men came from over fifty two countries to Spain, to fight in a country that wasn't their own, for a Republic that wasn't theirs. They saw themselves as 'comrades in a great campaign, co-workers in a magnificent enterprise' (Gray 2008: 26) but they did not achieve what they set out to do. They were fighting against troops with better training and equipment who had the help of Mussolini and Hitler's forces, but they were also let down by their own leaders who were unable to maintain a united front against fascism. The faith of these men who went to fight for the Spanish Republic moved and inspired me when I read about it in their own words, but faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin, and it was devastating to discover how badly this faith was betrayed by the actions of the communist leaders.

By the end of 1937 there were an alarmingly large number of left wing heretics in Republican gaols, and some International Brigade volunteers were going home disillusioned by communist dishonesty and power-seeking. (Toynbee 1976: 40)

Over seventy years after the end of the war, the conflict still provokes considerable interest. Generally recognised as one of the crucial political battlegrounds of the recent history, the Spanish civil war is often referred to as the last great cause, and the real tragedy of all the violent polemics between the Republic's various factions is that they lost not only the war but the faith of their soldiers.

After the war, a Spanish corps commander told me that he considered the Communist propaganda to have done the Republican cause more harm than good. We had a good enough cause to have been able to afford to tell the truth. (Koestler 1950: 250)

There can be no doubt that many of the men who fought in the International Brigades accepted what they were told by the Party, but there were others, men who had believed that they were fighting in good faith for a worthy cause, who came to mistrust the leaders that had betrayed the pact of solidarity made in the first days of the war among the left wing parties.

This was a crushing realisation for many of the volunteers, fighting for a cause in which they passionately believed but under leadership which they distrusted and which regarded men like Bob Smillie, George Orwell and Jason Gurney as enemies. This bleeding of political beliefs into social status and camaraderie was something I wanted to explore further; the sudden shift in attitude toward men previously called ‘comrade’, the euphoria of arriving to participate in the war against fascism and the subsequent comedown. They saw themselves as crusaders, defenders of democracy, comrades united against fascism in ‘a new world of universal freedom and equality’ (Gurney 1979: 49) but their experience of the war effectively shattered these core ideals, leaving only the remnants of this belief and the rejection of certainty. These men were the victims of a Faustian pact, lost and far from home, no longer sure what they were fighting for. They lost not only the war, but the faith that had motivated them to sign up in the first place and this central message, read between the lines of the many accounts of the war, provided the theme for *What Remains*.

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